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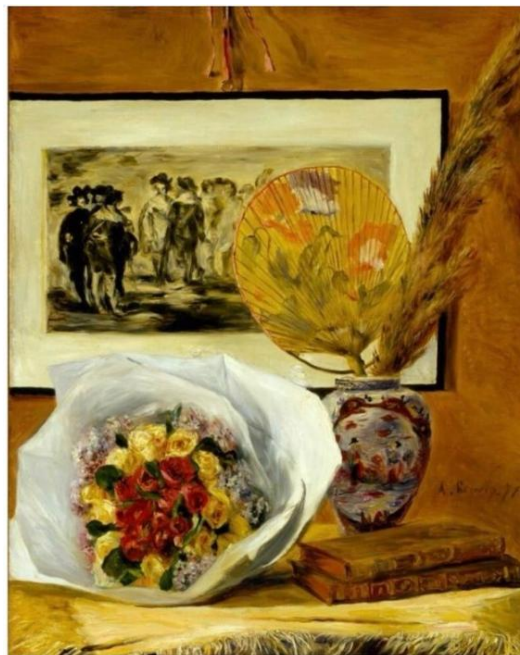
## ルノワールのジャポニスム

# Renoir's Japonisme: In the Frosting and Filling of his Art From 'Kogei' Aesthetics to an Implicit Philosophy of 'Wa'

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“Old Corot opened our eyes to the beauty of the Loing, which is a river like any other;  
and I am sure that the Japanese landscape is no more beautiful than other landscapes.  
But the point is that Japanese painters knew how to bring out their hidden treasure.”

Auguste Renoir speaking to his son, in *Renoir, My Father* by Jean Renoir



Auguste Renoir, 'Still Life with Bouquet', 1871, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

The above painting by Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919) was the frontispiece for a landmark 1975 exhibition in Cleveland, Ohio. Writing for *The New York Times*, John Russell, chief art critic for the paper observed:

“At the very beginning of ‘Japonisme,’ the exhibition that has drawn large and conspicuously attentive crowds to the Cleveland Museum of Art, there is a painting by Renoir that brings most visitors to a halt. It is dated 1871 and is quite unlike most people’s idea of Renoir. The amiable hedonist of the female nudes is not in evidence. In his place is a man who is making an inventory of the objects he likes best. The painting is not so much built up as added to, and makes it clear that, at that moment in Renoir’s career there were two sides to his creative personality—a European side and Japanese side.” (*The New York Times*, Aug. 23, 1975, p. 19)

—A “*Japanese side*” to Renoir’s creativity—this was an assertion perhaps more easily made then than it is today. For those were the days of a “Japonisme Renaissance”—a resurgence of interest in things Japanese from origami to judo, particularly in the United States. This was due in no small part to the post-WWII US occupation of Japan, and thus close encounter with Japanese culture, a revival that would continue well into the 1970s. Such ideas were not met with the resistance they would encounter in the 21st century, an age presumably more enlightened.

*The New York Times* art critic then finds symbols of an East-West interaction within the painting, whose layout also reveals a Japanese compositional approach:

“A dark print in a dark frame stands for Europe, in this context, together with two dusky old books in leather bindings and a large bouquet of flowers wrapped in white paper. In contrast to all this, Renoir included a Japanese fan and a Japanese pot—objects that, by their fresh, bright and stylized color, make quite a different impression. Renoir set all this on canvas not in a formal European way, but rather as Hokusai laid out his images in the ‘Manga,’ a 15 volume sourcebook of images in woodcut, which had been current in Paris since the eighteenth-fifties.” (‘On Art: Japonisme Stirring Cleveland’, *The New York Times*, Aug. 23, 1975, p. 19)

Gabriel P. Weisberg, teaching art history for many years at the University of Minnesota, wrote the accompanying text to the exhibition, *Japonisme: Japanese influence on French Art, 1854-1910* (Cleveland Museum of Art, 1975), a milestone in japonisme scholarship itself. (Henceforth ‘japonisme’ will be in lowercase as an influence upon art styles, capitalized only when meant as a self-conscious art movement.) Regarding the painting, Weisberg observed:

“The Renoir painting *Still Life with Bouquet*, 1871, shows how the color of a Japanese fan can set the tone for a whole painting. It also illustrates the importance of fans and prints in studios and homes of French artists, for Monet was not the only painter to come under this influence.” (1975: 118)

Renoir was no exception—Japanese motifs are found in his works throughout his long career. And as will be plain to see, their role was not merely one of added exotic interest.

His kimono-clad ‘Madame Hériot’ (1882, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg; Hériot is often confused with ‘Henriot’, a frequent sitter of Renoir’s portraits), below, was the kind of piece every Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painter produced, almost as if a ritual tribute to the new age of art with which Japan was strongly associated. Likewise for the subject, to have a portrait done in kimono was a mark of sophistication for a woman who considered herself an aesthete, becoming a tradition for the cultural elite well into the 20th century.

But what is of interest to us is not just the appearance of Japanese symbolism in Renoir’s paintings. Such symbols also hint at a source for a fundamental characteristic of Renoir’s artistry—his sensibility towards color, tone, and texture. It is this aspect of his work that shares an aesthetic with Japanese artisanal crafts called ‘kogeï’, such as textiles, porcelains, and fans.

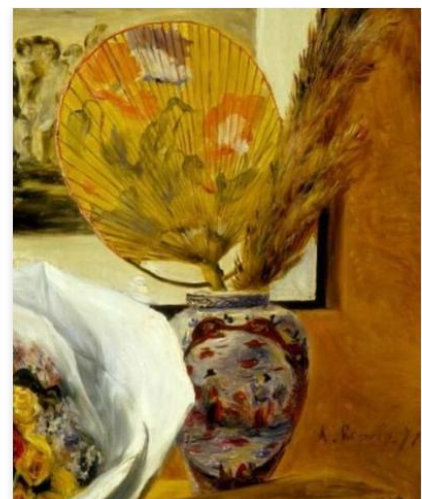
To elaborate, consider that on one hand, his paintings possess a quality not unlike the rich colors of a kimono; brightly contrasting colors with a silky or fine porcelain ‘Kakiemon-like’ delicacy and sheen. Simultaneously, on the other hand, there is a more subdued and pastel-like aspect, a fading and spreading of color—not so unlike a typical Japanese sensu (radiating and folding fan) or uchiwa (flat and fixed fan) design often done in ‘tomei sui-sai’ (diluted watercolor/wash), allowing light to pass through it, and exceedingly popular in Europe at the time. The sensu fan to the left, in ‘Girl with Fan’ (1881, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg), whether Japanese or otherwise, serves to aptly illustrate the characteristics of Japanese fans in question, and the contrast with the bright hues and porcelain-like luster of Madame Hériot’s kimono.



Girl with Fan, 1881, Hermitage



Madame Hériot, 1882, Hamburger Kunsthalle



Detail of Still Life with Bouquet, 1871, MFAH

And now looking once more at the first painting, focusing on the fan and the vase, we see it quite succinctly encapsulates those two aspects of Renoir's japonisme.

The luxuriant combination of those two chromatic qualities, one earthy and diffused as in fan painting, and one highly reflective of light and silken as in ceramic surfaces—characterizes much of Renoir's work. They also, not coincidentally, are related to the two crafts on which Renoir spent his formative years, first in porcelain décor for Lévy-Frères, and then in decorative painting with his own elder brother, Henri. Oshima Seiji, an early researcher of primary sources on japonisme (past director of the Setagaya Art Museum), in his *Japonisme — Impressionism, Ukiyo-e, and their Milieu* (ジャポニスム — 印象派と浮世絵の周辺, Kodansha, 1992), devotes a whole chapter to Renoir, in which he suggests that Renoir, having worked in a ceramic factory, and later painting specifically sensu-type fans, was most likely to have been in a position where he could acquire at least some knowledge of Oriental art. (1992: 188)

While this period of Renoir's life is often passed over as a time of primarily Rococo style influence, the fact that he spent a good number of years, from the ages of 13 to 17 or so in porcelain design, and afterwards a few more years for his brother engaged in fan painting and other decorative work, must have left an indelible impression upon his aesthetic sensibilities. The Rococo style, despite its image of being an insulated European aristocratic phenomenon, especially the decorative style, was in no small way a product of what is usually called 'chinoiserie'—but which in reality was in good part formed by a 'japonaiserie' of Imari porcelain, sensu folding fans, urushi (lacquer) ware, and kimonos (see '18th Century Japonisme' at japonisme.org). These were sought after by royal courts and aristocratic families for their distinctive design and chromatic qualities, differing from the Chinese and recognized as such, consciously imitated and incorporated into European decorative arts by porcelain designers and ébénistes (cabinetmakers).

Furthermore, porcelain and fan design in Renoir's early days was not immune to the wave of Japanese crafts entering Europe from the 1850s onward. That is to say, the crafts Renoir was engaged in, with a strong Rococo character, were intrinsically connected to the chromatic aesthetics of the Far East from their beginnings, and in that sense an aspect of Eastern aesthetic sensibility was inevitably absorbed by Renoir to at least some extent, which moreover converged with the renewed influence of Japanese art in the 19th century. And it is worth recalling that the 19th century japonisme of ceramics started well *before* that of Impressionist painting. The Service Rousseau, just one example of Japan-inspired tableware early on, with images from Hokusai's *Manga*, was manufactured by Lebeuf, Millet et Cie in 1866 and displayed at the Paris Expo of 1867—designed by that foremost of Japonistes, Félix Bracquemond.

Renoir's 'Woman (or previously Girl) with a Fan' (c. 1879, Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, MA), below left, once again reflects the aesthetic combination of qualities we have associated with the fan vs. the vase, or here chrysanthemums. The woman holds a fan that is an uchiwa, done in the sui-sai style; in contrast to it, a radiant profusion of Japanese chrysanthemums reaches above her—flowers that were becoming all the rage in Europe, thanks to their vibrant color and luxuriant forms. These attributes of the flower were not an accidental result of nature, but cultivated over the centuries to be so, selectively bred and carefully crafted, if you will, much like the ceramic arts.



Woman with a Fan, c. 1879, Clark Art Institute



Young Woman with a Japanese Umbrella, 1876, private collection, Wikimedia Commons



John House, Emeritus Professor at The Courtauld Institute in London, well-regarded scholar of 19th century French art and curator of a number of Renoir exhibitions, in his *Renoir: Master Impressionist* (1994), after acknowledging the fan “overtly evokes the fashionable vogue for Japanese decorative arts”, goes on to suggest this was not all that was Japanese about it, saying:

“However, composition of the picture, as well, may reflect the impact of Japanese art on Renoir, with its asymmetrical emphases and its strongly emphasized surface patterning.” (1994: 80)

Certainly, the dividing up of the backdrop into highly contrastive zones, and/or placing ornamental features above the subject to one side, was a standard format in ukiyo-e, i.e., Japanese woodblock prints. Monet’s collection of ukiyo-e at Giverny, contains several such prints, among them Utagawa Kuniyoshi’s ‘Septembre, estampe de la suite les Cinq Festivals’ (1843-47, 五節句 長月, Monet Collection of Japanese prints, in *Les Estampes Japonaises de Monet à Giverny*, 2000: 31), which features on the upper right side, a large blue and white porcelain planter with rich red and yellow chrysanthemums reaching upward, above a woman in a brilliantly patterned (with flying geese) kimono, while the upper left side of the picture is filled with writing in a vertical format dispersed over the space. And though not in this Kuniyoshi print, often ukiyo-e bust portraits situate the subject lower in the overall frame of the picture, as in Renoir’s ‘Woman with a Fan’, unusual in Western portraiture. But we will reserve further discussion of compositional qualities for later.

On the right of ‘Woman with a Fan’ is Renoir’s ‘Young Woman with a Japanese Umbrella’ (1876, private collection), and this too, seems to reflect the same combination of a bright ceramic along with the subdued diffusion of painted paper craft. The Japanese umbrella, constructed of oil-coated and painted paper, designed with open, uncolored spaces, allows light to pass through and illuminate the orange pigment; while the woman’s blue and white dress possesses a fineness and brilliance that reminds one of classic ‘blue-and-white’ china, from China or Japan.

Another painting of Renoir’s that invites comparison to the ‘Young Woman with a Japanese Umbrella’ is his ‘A Girl (or Woman) gathering Flowers’ (c. 1872-74, Clark Art Institute), shown below, left. John House, speaking in regard to the preoccupation with the effects of open-air light and color in Renoir’s 1882 exhibition of his own works, focuses upon this painting, which also depicts what is likely a Japanese parasol:

“... The young woman stands stiffly amid a flowery meadow, a bunch of flowers in her hand and her fashionable Japanese-style parasol at her feet; her costume shows that she is a parisienne, while the awkwardness of her stance suggests that she feels ill at ease amid the lavish natural growth of the meadow.” (*Renoir Landscapes: 1865-1883*, The National Gallery, London, 2007: 15)



A Girl gathering Flowers, c. 1872-74, Clark Art Institute



Dance in the Country, 1883, Orsay

The parasol, probably the same one used in ‘Young Woman with a Japanese Umbrella’, with its splotches of orange and blue rim, is not just a prop for added exotic interest; it is a critical element in creating the kind of color balance and variety

in open-air light Renoir was aiming for, in a picture that would otherwise become rather subdued—almost monotonous—without it. That it is a Japanese-type parasol, not an opaque European one, with its peculiar translucent quality, passing light and creating a natural luminosity and harmony of color, is what makes it a truly apropos element in creating the total, desired effect of the picture. The Japanese parasol is emblematic, a perfect symbol, possibly even inspirational of Renoir's ideal synthesis of light and color. Even as a very small element in a painting, such as in his 'Woman with a Parasol in a Garden' (1875, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid), assuming it is a Japanese or at least a Japanese-type parasol—given its luminous quality, size, and seemingly flat, spreading form (contrasting, for instance, with the European-style pink parasol of 'Woman with Parasol and Small Child on a Sunlit Hillside', 1873, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)—it plays an indispensable role in defining the work, without which the human element, focal point, and depth would be lost within the luxuriant growth, reducing the painting to a near decorative mass.

Something comparable might be said of the sensu fan in Renoir's well-known 'Dance in the Country' (1883, Musée d'Orsay), shown above next to the 'Girl gathering Flowers'. It also is of paramount importance in defining the character of the picture. Despite its blurred aspect, the fan (held by Renoir's future wife, Aline Charigot) is most likely Japanese in manufacture given its compositional layout and general design, and confirms what we have discussed regarding Renoir's expression of the 'kogeï aesthetic'. The particular popularity of this painting, among his images of dancing couples, is of course attributable to multiple aspects of its charm, but no doubt one of them, and something that makes the image stand out so, is the strongly felt presence of the fan. The fan provides the 'paper kogeï chromatics' contrasting with the figure of Aline and her dress, which provides the fine, porcelain-like sheen in the balancing act of the two qualities.

Taking a look at a few other examples of his fans, it appears they too reflect Japanese aesthetic qualities. To the left is detail from 'A Lady with a Fan' (1906, private collection, image Wikimedia Commons), a painting of a young woman alluringly attired in a diaphanous dress who hardly seems to have a connection with Japan; except that her fan emits the luster of a stick and guard lacquered decorative-type sensu, often surfaced with combinations of gold or silver mixed with rich greens, purples, reds, and the like, to produce a similar subtle glow.



Detail of A Lady with a Fan, 1906, private collection



Detail of Dance in the Country, 1883, Orsay

Whatever its actual manufacture, European, Chinese, or Japanese, it is emulative of Japanese models, if only indirectly, for the Rococo-style folding fan is an evolution from the sensu or 'ogi' (another, older name for it, encompassing the larger type) coming from Japan, or from Chinese versions of it. On this point, as in the case with Japanese innovations in any age, the air needs to be cleared a little. One of the oldest folding fans extant is the Toji Temple fan of 877; folding fans were brought as gifts to the Chinese court by the Japanese monk Chonen in 986; later they would be highly regarded and sought after in Ming-era China, as they would be when they reached Europe, primarily via Portugal and Spain in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, and afterwards via Holland. Depicted abundantly in color paintings known as 'Yamato-e' from the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries of the Heian period, they can even be found in early Baroque-era Italian portraits of Japanese emissaries, such as that of Hasekura Tsunenaga by Archita Ricci in 1615 (on the origins of the folding fan, including Chinese historical documentation and modern scholarship, see '18th Century Japonisme' at japonisme.org). That being said, we can now move ahead.

Perhaps more intriguing than the paintings above, is the following 'Portrait of Madame Hartmann' (1874, Musée d'Orsay), where the fan is but the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Yes, here too, the sensu fan she holds reveals the translucent, desaturated, ethereal quality we have been speaking of, contrasting with the deep, highly reflective sheen of her heavy black dress. But there is much more to consider. Note first the pose of Madame Hartmann, then the composition of the bulky form of the dress—with its heavy, complex folds—and how it fills much of the canvas. Observe the finely distributed gradations of chromatic tone. Add to that its muffled hues and surprisingly restrained elegance for Renoir, i.e., its 'shibui' chromatics emphasizing black and light blue, with some brownish red. All this suggests the possible influence of 'aizuri-e' (藍摺絵 – Japanese characters will be included for clarification in certain cases), literally 'blue printed pictures' where



the picture is primarily in a blue ink thinned to varying tones. A typical example is Keisai Eisen's 'Kashiku of the Tsuruya' (1830s, MFA Boston), shown alongside Madame Hartmann.

Various aspects of the ukiyo-e aizuri style appear to have been subtly transformed in Renoir's picture. Nevertheless, we can still make out the correspondences: not only of the central subject, her pose and massing of volumes and angles, but even the existence of a partially hidden, smaller and younger secondary subject. In Renoir it is the girl playing the piano hidden by the piano and cropped by the left edge of the frame so that we see only her face and some of her white dress; in Eisen it is the girl mostly hidden within the folds of the kimono. In both cases, they may go unnoticed at first glance. This, by the way, is a clear indication that Renoir is conscious of Japanese print compositions. Manet used the same technique in his 'Nana' (1877, Hamburger Kunsthalle), which even John Rewald asserts in his *The History of Impressionism* was a "device borrowed from Japanese prints" (1973: 403).

The wall in Renoir with its patterned, mixed tones of blue and an off-white (like that of woodblock prints) is an artful inversion of the aizuri chromatic to the background, while the black mass of the dress provides the contrasting uniformity which in the aizuri-e is provided by the surrounding void. In other words, the chromatic intricacy (dress) vs. chromatic uniformity (backdrop) is reversed—or rather we should say mixed, for Madame Hartmann's dress, while monochrome, maintains the level of complexity of volume, line, and tone gradations of an aizuri-e. Renoir has reformulated it with restraint in a typically French bourgeois setting, fully assimilating and synthesizing the aizuri aesthetic with that of his own.

As an added observation, the overall 'shibui' quality of the picture also is reminiscent of 'surimono'—privately commissioned, limited edition woodblock prints, employing luxury materials as metallic dust combined with fine embossing, techniques shared with certain high quality nishiki-e (full color ukiyo-e) prints as well, such as those by Sharaku, on which were applied one, or a combination of, 'gofun' (shell powder), 'enpaku' (white lead), or 'kira' (mica dust 雲母), producing subtle, rich mattes to dark, shimmering lusters, reminiscent of Madame Hartmann's dress.



Renoir, Portrait of Madame Hartmann, 1874, Orsay



Eisen, Kashiku of the Tsuruya, 1830s, MFA Boston

If one is observant, a good number of Japanese 'clues' can be found in Renoir's paintings. They at times reflect his personal artistic choice, or at other times simply the prevalence of Japanese art and crafts to be found in French homes at the time. In either case, the stimulus of Japanese art was an inescapable reality, whether in the homes of his intimate friends and Japanophiles, such as the Monets, leading to works such as his 'Portrait of Madame Monet Reading' (c. 1874, Clark Art Institute), or when deciding to paint his own son holding a Japanese sensu fan, as in 'Coco à l'éventail japonais' (1906, private collection, image Wikimedia Commons). —A painting whose title, by the way, and others by Renoir like it, often undergo a 'genericization' in English, losing the clear cultural identifications present in the original French.



Detail of Madame Monet Reading, 1874, Clark Art Institute



Detail of Coco à l'éventail japonais, 1906, private collection

Renoir clearly associated the fan designs in his paintings with Japan. As he wrote in his unpublished manifesto on art, *Grammar of Art* (or just *Grammar*, 1883-1884), into which he poured his core convictions, an artist should learn from nature directly rather than relying on existing models if one wished to produce things of true beauty, and he often raised the example of Japan to illustrate this, including its fans:

“The Japanese have certainly taken their ~~fans~~ [crossed out] screens from the wing of a butterfly, otherwise they would have made them round or oval.” (paragraph 142, in Herbert, 2000: 150)

Though conjectural, Renoir perhaps crossed out the word “fan” (*éventail*) and substituted “screen” (*écran*, as in *écran à main*) to include the *uchiwa* style fixed fan, which comes in organic shapes of its own, neither perfectly round nor oval; though the spreadable *sensu* fan seems also to correspond to one side of a butterfly’s wings. In any case, he found Japanese fans exemplary as a case of design done the right way—that is directly from, and in harmony with, Nature. This notion of the artist being true to and one with Nature, in short, a conception of intrinsic and holistic harmony, evokes the Japanese expression ‘*Wa*’ (和), which at the same time, quite in line with Renoir’s thinking, signifies in the Japanese language something being characteristically Japanese—such as in ‘*wafu*’ (和風).

Thus, while Renoir advocated artistic production from direct observation of nature in the Japanese manner, at the same time, it has been suggested there was another aspect of his awareness of Japan that seeped in from his circle of artist friends and patrons such as the Charpentiers or Henri Cernuschi, or writers/critics such as Philippe Burty, Théodore Duret, and Théophile Gautier, who were all ardent Japanophiles, veritably at the very forefront of Japonisme. Even Gautier’s daughter, Judith, whom Renoir seems to have had a romantic interest in, was no less enamored of Japan: “Renoir probably was in love with this passionate admirer of Japan and Wagner”, according to the late Sophie Monneret, that prolific scholar of Impressionism at the École du Louvre, in *Renoir* (1990: 10). Judith Gautier was a central figure in literary Japonisme, publishing *L’Usurpateur* in 1875, a tale of samurai heroes set in feudal Japan, followed by other works including *Poèmes de la libellule* in 1885, a translation of *tanka* poems in collaboration with the Marquis Saionji Kinmochi, which has been called “a remarkable feat of versification” by William L. Schwartz (at Stanford University’s then burgeoning Department of Romanic Languages), in *The Imaginative Interpretation of the Far East in Modern French Literature 1800–1910* (1927: 53). It was this omnipresent fascination with Japan among cultural elites that was to become a widespread bourgeois fad which probably aroused in Renoir a counter-reaction to it, even if Japanese art was instructive for him. As a spirited individualist, he disliked any kind of unquestioning infatuation, just as he found a blind adulation of Greek ideals of beauty to be nonsense. There are a few anecdotes that form the basis of the argument against Japanese influence on Renoir, and we should first address them, before going any further. François Fosca’s *Renoir* (H. N. Abrams, 1969) is typical:

“...it is worth remarking that he [Renoir] never shared the passion for Japanese art so general about 1865. According to himself, he was put off it by Madame Charpentier’s rooms, which she had filled with *japonaiseries*, as was currently fashionable. ‘During the exhibition of 1889, my friend Burty took me to see some Japanese prints. I won’t deny that there were some very fine things there; but when I came out of the gallery I saw a Louis XIV chair upholstered in a simple little bit of tapestry, and there couldn’t have been anything more simple, I would have embraced that chair.’

On another occasion, when Vollard asked him if the Impressionists had been influenced by Japanese prints, he replied: ‘Unfortunately yes, at first. Japanese prints are certainly very interesting, as Japanese prints—in other words, as long as they stay in Japan. A people should not appropriate what belongs to another race; in so doing, they are apt to make stupid mistakes. There would soon be a kind of universal art, without any individual characteristics. I once thanked a critic who had written that I belonged unmistakably to the French school. “And if I am pleased to belong to the French school,” I told him, “it is not because I wish to assert its superiority over all other schools, but because, since I am a Frenchman, I should belong to my own country.”’” (*Renoir*, 1969: 272)

These tidbits, circulating much like the apocryphal story of Hokusai discovered as wrapping paper (when in fact it was a booklet, according to Bracquemond, included in the package, probably as an added gift by the seller), are the gist of the argument provided by the naysayers, drawn from Ambroise Vollard. Yet as Ronald Pickvance points out, Vollard's "reported conversations with the artist are not always to be trusted" (Pickvance, 'Monet and Renoir in the mid-1870s', *Japonisme in Art: An International Symposium*, 1980: 159). Robert L. Herbert, in his invaluable study of Renoir's own writings many unpublished until then (*Nature's Workshop: Renoir's Writings on the Decorative Arts*, Yale, 2000), verified that, although Vollard "published sentences as though Renoir were speaking directly to him", these were taken from certain specific paragraphs from a draft of Renoir's, and "Vollard interlarded them with supposed questions of his own." (Herbert, 2000: 158). To put it bluntly, he literally made-up portions of his conversations with Renoir, incorporating some of Renoir's writings, using a cut and paste approach.

Interestingly, Vollard also records that Renoir "knew Hayashi Tadamasa very well" (in Pickvance, 1980: 169)—Hayashi being an instrumental figure in introducing and explaining Japanese art to European critics, collectors, and artists. But the idea of Renoir spending time with Hayashi seems to be at odds with his supposed disdain for Japanese art.

Furthermore, the questions Vollard supposedly asked Renoir show a blatant priming for a negative response: "Didn't the Impressionists allow themselves to be too much influenced by foreign schools? Japanese art, for instance?" (Vollard, *Renoir: An Intimate Record*, Knopf 1925, Dover 1990: 28) In a limited search of Vollard's writings and biographical material, nowhere has this author found a positive comment on anything Japanese, except for a light remark regarding Okakura Kakuzo's *The Book of Tea*, and that in the bibliography of his Renoir memoir. Might it be that what Vollard portrays as Renoir's opinion about Japan was culled and magnified from a more nuanced attitude, and is rather a reflection—a classic case of projection—of his own personal opinions?

Instead we should listen to Renoir himself—what he himself wrote for his contemporaries and for posterity. While he abhorred mindless imitation of others, he felt Japan's example was of paramount importance. In his *Grammar* (1883-1884), which was "Dedicated to all those who love art and those who wish to make a career out of it", he wrote:

"What's necessary is to turn our attention to it in order to emulate it, but certainly not to do any copying. You need to go and see beautiful Japanese things and ask yourself why they are beautiful. Use the same means to do everything else." (paragraph 23, in Herbert, 2000: 127)

This point is emphasized repeatedly:

"We must do as the Japanese: love and copy nature without ceasing, but with our French eye, in order to equal their strength by the same means, the only right ones, without resembling them in any way. In copying them we would be making pseudo-Japanese." (paragraph 45, in Herbert, 2000: 132)

In his letters too, we receive a different impression, for there are no open disavowals of interest in Japanese art, and some indications of the opposite. Quite eye-opening is a letter Renoir sent to Philippe Burty, the coiner of the term "Japonisme", kept at the Louvre's Département des Arts graphiques, recently excavated by Colin B. Bailey, British art historian with a focus on Renoir, and Director of the Morgan Library & Museum in New York City:

"In an undated (and unpublished) letter to his friend Philippe Burty, likely written in mid-April 1874, Renoir claimed that while he would have liked to chat with him about Japonisme, 'je ne suis pas encore complètement débrouillé avec cet accrochage compliqué.' The letter is in the Musée du Louvre." ('A Daring Departure' *The New York Review of Books*, 27 Feb. 2025, footnote 5).

While concerned with the Impressionist installation he was overseeing at the time, Japonisme was also something that loomed in his thoughts, that he certainly had an interest in, and wished to know more about, from at least the mid-1870s.

This may rightly be deemed a 'far cry' from the way Vollard portrays it. We will hear more from Renoir on Japan later; in the meantime, the above should suffice for the reader to take Vollard's version of things with a grain of salt. Nevertheless, biographies of Renoir that forego serious consideration of Japanese influence side step the implications of Renoir's own writings, and instead amplify Vollard's. But quite frankly, any scholarly position resting substantially on Vollard's reported conversations must be considered built on demonstrably compromised foundations.

There are though, certain authors, perhaps sensing the truth, though not necessarily comfortable with it, that offer a token example of that influence. The American painter and writer Walter Pach, who had met Renoir in person—a pivotal figure in introducing modern art to the American public—studied under artists known for their use of Japanese motifs, as Robert



Henri (e.g. Edna Smith portraits) and William Merritt Chase (likewise numerous portraits in kimono). Thus he must have been well aware of the impact of japonisme. In his book *Renoir* (1950), Pach mentions Japanese art once, at the end of his commentary on 'Two Little Circus Girls', now better known as 'Acrobats at the Cirque Fernando' (1879, Art Institute of Chicago), concluding cryptically:

"Much of the planning of this picture is due to the influence of Japanese art, which in the seventies [1870s] was the great catalyst to the art of the Western world." (*Renoir*, 1950, edition 1983: 62)

If that be the case, his discussion of it, contained in that one sentence, must be called extraordinarily brief. It hardly makes sense that if some major artistic movement did have an effect on a painter, it would appear only in a single piece. No one is a Japoniste, or for that matter, an Orientalist or Romanticist for a day. The German art historian-writer Bruno F. Schneider, in his *Renoir* (1958), admits two examples, though somewhat begrudgingly, where Japanese woodblock prints, ukiyo-e, were a transformative factor for the artist's paintings:

"The Lady with Veil [c. 1875-76, Orsay] too differs as far as colour is concerned, from the work of previous years. The delicate pastel shades hardly recall the past at all, and the plane composition of the picture, the conspicuous emptiness of the right half, point rather to Japanese influences, which indeed was rife everywhere after the World Exhibition in Paris in 1867, with its Oriental pavilions. ... Renoir himself did not like the subtle colour harmonies of the Japanese woodcuts, but that does not exclude the possibility that in his new uncertainty he borrowed his pastel shades from the Japanese." (1958: 66)

Schneider identifies a related aspect to 'Dance in the City' (or 'Town', 1883, Musée d'Orsay):

"Mural ideas have a stronger effect in this picture, and the economical colouring of the large areas is again influenced by Japanese coloured woodcuts." (1958: 71)

As seen in Renoir's painting of Madame Hartmann, this 'shibui' aesthetic—a term semantically useful (no less than 'umami' in culinary description, however much tossed about colloquially)—this restraining of color hues, and here the "economical colouring of the large areas" which roughly corresponds to the concept of 'jitsubushi' (地漬し), seems to appear on and off from around 1874 for the next decade or so, in paintings including, but not limited to, the two above. Actually, around the time he painted the 'Lady with Veil', he produced a host of paintings in a related manner.



The Lady with Veil, c. 1875-76, Orsay



Dance in the City, 1883, Orsay



Henriette Henriot, 1876, Oskar Reinhart

His 'Portrait of Henriette Henriot' (1876, Sammlung Oskar Reinhart, Winterthur), recalls the japonisme aspects of Manet's 'The Fifer', such as the flattening of the pictorial plane and the treatment of the background. Then there is his 'Woman in Black' (1877, Hermitage Museum) recalling faintly the 'bunjinga' (literati ink-wash picture) style, employing a 'guzumi' (charcoal ink mixed with pigment, 具墨) touch. His 'Young Woman' (1877, Sanno Art Museum, Osaka) is an odd piece, like a dark apparition ready to join those of Kawanabe Kyosai, an eccentric genius of whimsy, acquainted with the likes of Émile Guimet, or perhaps a hunched-over crow by Watanabe Seitei, whose reputation in the West was such that he demonstrated his skills at the 1878 Paris world exposition. While the 'Portrait of Claude Monet' (1875, Musée d'Orsay) reminds one of zen portraiture or that of other sages, next to a tree or bamboo grove in black sumi-ink on an old hanging

scroll—only that Monet holds a brush instead of the priest's scepter or short staff. This is not such an impossible idea, given the vogue, not only for Japanese art at the time, but the growing interest in Eastern religions, apparent in Schopenhauer's philosophy, Max Mueller's translations, culminating in the publication of Sir Edwin Arnold's popular *Light of Asia* (1879), a sutra-like recounting of the life and philosophy of the Buddha. Buddhist statues were a fixture of mantelpieces of the homes of artists, musicians, and writers of the time, and appear frequently in old photographs. In fact, 'Japonisme and Eastern Thoughts: Religion, Philosophy and Aesthetics 19th-20th century', was the topic of The Society for the Study of Japonisme's 2021 international symposium. Even Renoir's 'Self-Portrait' (1876, Harvard Art Museums), might be mingled in this discussion, with its background somewhat reminiscent of 'amibokashi' (網ボカシ), a technique using a shading net often in combination with paper cutouts, which produces a mixture of indistinct, broken orthogonal shapes in soft colors. Why as early as 1868 or so, Renoir's 'Landscape, Snow Effect' (c. 1868, private collection), gives an inescapable impression of something Eastern, an aspect of Hiroshige's 'Kanbara: Night Snow' (1833-34, MFA title), or of an ink-wash winter scene done with 'momigami' (揉み紙, literally 'massaged paper')—an intentionally crinkled painting surface, producing a complex, weathered look.

The descriptions above were the result of this author's subjective first impressions, and as such, are not an adamant assertion of influence—but ideas for a novel hypothesis, suggestions for possible avenues of research. In hindsight, as a whole, they seemed to evoke 'suiboku-ga', Sino-Japanese brush paintings in ink-wash. Usually mounted on hanging scrolls, they were known generically as 'kakemono'—depicted by Renoir at the Charpentiers' Japanese salon (to be discussed). They were a fixture of imported Japanese goods, along with, but without the fanfare surrounding, ukiyo-e prints. Degas, for one, did several pastels on monotype which distinctly evoke classic Japanese/Chinese suiboku painting. One is reminiscent of the uniquely shaped land bridge 'Ama-no-hashidate' near Kyoto ('Cote rocheuse' c. 1890, Galerie Belvedere, Vienna); and three in what strongly recalls 'sansui'—'mountain and water' genre, ink-wash pictures ('Sentier de prairie', Yale University Art Gallery; 'Paysage avec eau', L.1038; and 'Paysage', Brame-Reff 136, dates unknown). See 'Hayashi Tadamasa and Degas: Hayashi's Lost Collection of Occidental Art' by Mabuchi Akiko, director of the National Museum of Western Art in Tokyo (*Society for the Study of Japonisme Report* 16, 1996, pp. 20-37).

Geneviève Lacambre, one of France's Honorary General Curators of Heritage, and once chief curator at the Orsay Museum, in the Museum publication, *Musee d'Orsay: Impressionist and Post-Impressionist Masterpieces* (1984), notes in her discussion of Manet's 'The Fifer' that "In fact he was paying tribute, not only to Spain, but to the unmodulated blacks in the Japanese prints he admired." (1984: 24) If so, Renoir's 'dark' works must be placed in the context of that interest in the "unmodulated blacks" of which Manet was the trendsetter, which Renoir was no doubt fully aware of. Japanese prints of the 18th and early 19th centuries, such as those of Suzuki Harunobu and Kitagawa Utamaro, very popular among European collectors, and despite being called 'nishiki-e' (full color prints, 'brilliant like silk kimonos') were often a combination of black and a limited number of muted tones such as yellow, orange, and green. Many picture books, which also came over in good numbers, were monochrome, characterized by bold black outlines and 'tsubushi' (fill-ins) in black, Hokusai's being the most famous. The emphasis on black, whether from woodblock prints or hand-painted suiboku-ga, was in one form or another linked to Japanese art.

Now returning to Schneider, who, having acknowledged two instances of what we have seen to be a considerably wider pattern, is nevertheless quick to add: "This Eastern art, however, did not have a lasting influence on Renoir; he only made use of it while he was in search of new creative principles."—Though it would seem that any source, if key in finding "new creative principles", that is a stimulus that is catalytic, should be considered of long-lasting significance.

This naysaying would only worsen towards the end of the 20th century, where the peculiar trend arose that those who denied or minimized the Japanese impact upon Impressionism were best received by publishers and academics, notably in the English-speaking world. For instance, Anne Distel, in her *Renoir: A Sensuous Vision* (1995), starts Chapter III, "Success and Maturity" with the categorical statement:

"Of all the Impressionists, Renoir was the least affected by the craze for things Japanese that so strongly marked this generation of artists. Nevertheless, by placing a *cheap* Japanese fan in the hands of his young model (probably the actress Jeanne Samary) in 1881, *for once he gave in to the fashion*, painting a 'Japanese Parisian.'" (1995: 61, *italics added*)

Was the fan indeed cheap—a 19th century version of Japanese transistor radios that flooded France in the 1960s? It should be needless to say that the value of true artistic inspiration is not a matter of the pocketbook. Or if she is referring to the artistic quality of the fan, what we have here is a case of unabashed bias, no less than that of her mentor, John Rewald, who in his *The History of Impressionism*, describes ukiyo-e prints as "insipid" (1973: 208). Distel's assertion that Renoir *gave in to a fashion*, as if it were a bad habit or the wearing of bellbottoms, and just *once*, is surely false, as we have already repeatedly demonstrated. For Renoir in fact gave in frequently to the Japanese fashion throughout the years, just as Monet did, not only to Japanese fans, but to a host of porcelains, umbrellas, kimonos and other Japanese crafts. Japanese ukiyo-e prints too, were relatively inexpensive, compared to buying European paintings, perhaps to Distel's satisfaction.

Taking a step back for perspective on attitudes in scholarship, it appears that the idea of Japanese influence upon Renoir was more easily accepted in the 1970s, in line with what we might call a more open minded view of art history, and for that matter, history in general at the time. That was so in France and Germany, but also in English-speaking countries such as Britain and America. But as time went on, especially from the late 1980s onward, the more widely promoted art history surveys and their revised editions, such as those by Gombrich, Janson, Gardner, or Rewald, tended to underplay japonisme, despite the growing body of evidence for it—and the connection with specific artists such as Renoir. Rhetorical tactics grew alongside this hardening of attitudes, such as charges of ‘pareidolia’, particularly when cross-cultural influences were involved, while intra-European similarities were commonly accepted on weaker visual grounds. The reader can be the judge of what will be presented here, and distinguish between ‘seeing into things’ versus what is a pervasive, persistent pattern across visual examples and text, of a nature beyond coincidence—and heed his own instinct rather than the ‘herd instinct’. At the very least, he should not be cowed into rejecting a logical conclusion by its being labeled (by those who would have it otherwise) a hallucinatory affliction. Pareidolia is often nothing more than an underhanded ad hominem argument dressed in a formidable sounding Greek neologism, employed when there is no better proof of rebuttal.

That being said, now with our glasses cleaned, the role of japonisme in Impressionism can be seen more clearly. Impressionism did not “grow like mushrooms” on its own, to borrow a phrase from that friend of Renoir’s, Théodore Duret, who observed the trials and tribulations of that art movement as it unfolded before him. Naturally it built upon the artistic traditions of Europe, but critical too, he asserted, was the encounter with Japanese art (*Les Peintres impressionnistes*, 1878: 13-14).

We should also distinguish between different types of japonisme influence. The impact of japonisme was not limited to a direct assimilation of the aesthetic qualities of Japanese artifacts. Renoir was, it does seem, as suggested earlier, also swayed by ‘Japoniste’ painting by European artists depicting motifs or ideas associated with Japan, such as those by Whistler, but in a ‘mutated’ form. This seems to be quite clear in Renoir’s ‘Rapha Maître’ (1871, private collection, image Wikimedia Commons). Rapha, while pensively holding a Japanese fan in her hand, is otherwise neither dressed in a Japanese kimono, nor surrounded by Japanese goods as in Whistler’s painting, ‘Princess from the Land of Porcelain’ (1863-65, Smithsonian, National Museum of Asian Art, DC) —and yet there is an undeniable affinity, a ‘family resemblance’ of sorts, to borrow a phrase from the philosopher Wittgenstein.



Renoir, Rapha Maître, 1871, private collection



Whistler, Princess ... Land of Porcelain, 1863-65, Smithsonian



Kunimasa, Woman Holding a Fan, 1795-1801, MFA (top margin cropped)

Actually, many of the parallels between Renoir and Whistler are shared with the sub-genre of ukiyo-e female portraiture, known as ‘tate-e’, literally meaning ‘vertical’ or ‘upright’ picture. An example by Utagawa Kunimasa (1773–1810), ‘Woman Holding a Fan’ (1795-1801, MFA Boston) has been placed to the right. The three images lined up nicely illustrate the ‘evolution’ of japonisme painting influence taking place in European art.



Working our way first from Renoir to Whistler, we see each recognizably Japanese element has been replaced, so to speak, by something different, but that functions in a similar way, with similar effect. Instead of a shimmering silver kimono, hanging heavily in vertical layers, we have a shimmering exotic gold dress, layered horizontally, with sleeves suggestive of kimono sleeves. Both emphasize the slender, flat-chested verticality of the women, with the weight of their dresses spreading on the floor. Despite the light coming from opposite directions, the angle and shadows of the face are not so dissimilar in general aspect, as well as the shadow of darkness in their hearts. And the small delicate hands, only partially visible in both Renoir and Whistler, remind us of the tiny hands in 'bijinga' ever so lightly holding their uchiwa fans, whose designs are often of the same floral style.

The correspondences or substitutions extend beyond the figures themselves. In Renoir's image, a leafy plant with strong stems and large leaves shoots up asymmetrically (possibly a reworking of one of his earliest paintings, and reminiscent of designs in Kitagawa Utamaro's book of plants and insects, *Ehon mushi erami*, 1788), which acts as a naturalistic substitute for the floral designs on the byobu screen in Whistler's picture, whose compositions likewise emphasize the stems. Only with the smaller flowers does Renoir assert a 'French' arrangement. The floor is bare in Renoir, but the wallpaper serves the need for backdrop color and complexity, in place of the carpet and screen in Whistler. But each picture keeps a certain surface empty: the walls beyond the screen in Whistler and the aforementioned floor in Renoir. Finally, the angularity of the byobu screen is replicated by the angle of the bird cage in Renoir's composition.

Now looking at Whistler's painting in relation to the Kunimasa painting, the transmission of 'genetic' material becomes apparent: the elongated figure and that peculiar slouch, with the outer robe slightly slipping down the shoulder; the thick folded nature of the spreading robes at the floor, with the slight showing of the inner lining; and again the small hands with their delicate manner of holding the fan; in all this Whistler's attempt to emulate bijinga imagery is recognizable. And though there is none in the Kunimasa example here, byobu screens (and bird cages) are not uncommonly featured in such prints.

Thus, the self-evident resemblance with Japanese imagery is to be found in Whistler, but Renoir is not so far from it in certain respects of his composition that demarcate it from typical Western female portraiture. Those features of Renoir's painting are succinctly described by Paul Joannides, Emeritus Professor of the History of Art at Cambridge:

"This portrait is unusual in Renoir's early work in the elongation of the figure, the angularity of her draperies, and the wide-angle view, which makes it appear that the subject is about to slide out of the picture. The trellis-work wallpaper, the high wainscoting, and the large birdcage divide the space and seem to confine the sitter; and the flowers that jut into the lower left corner intrude upon her." (*Renoir: Life and Works*, 2000: 32)

These types of spatial tensions or disruptions have always been associated with Impressionist and Post-impressionist japonisme. Indeed, Joannides considers Renoir's painting to be the result of both the stimulus of Japanese examples and the example of Japan-influenced fellow painters:

"The inspiration for this organization came from Japanese prints, as the fan clearly indicates, but the general conception and the thick pigment with which the dress is painted are indebted to the work of Edouard Manet (1832-83) and James Whistler (1834-1903), both of whom were fascinated by japonisme." (*Ibid.*)

That is, Renoir's painting is a case of *direct* and *indirect transmission* of Japanese artistic qualities—from the stimulus of art actually from Japan, and that of art made from a consciousness of it. And to return to our metaphor one last time, japonisme might have been a 'recessive trait' in Renoir, but was still undoubtedly there under the surface. Gabriel Weisberg also suggests that Japanese influence may have been transmitted through the works of his circle of japonisant artist colleagues. Referring to Renoir's intimate friendship with the Monets, Weisberg writes in his major study on japonisme in France:

"The famous *La Japonaise*, 1876 (Boston Museum of Fine Arts), Monet's painting of his wife wrapped in a spectacular Japanese-appliqued cloth with fans on the wall behind her, is the one fashionable and obvious [Japan influenced] picture that he painted in this period. Renoir, Monet's friend, was sensitive to Japanese color but his compositions are less innovative than Monet's; where we see traces of Japonisme they may have come from the works of his friends rather than directly from the Japanese. An admiration for Japanese art is seen most clearly in the use Renoir made of fans, screens, and silks in his portraits, particularly those of Monet's wife." (*Japonisme*, 1975: 119)

A less obvious case, but in true japonisme style ‘à la Renoir’ is ‘Camille Monet Reading Le Figaro’, (1872-1874, Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon), otherwise known as ‘Madam Monet on a Sofa’. Sophie Monneret, who, by the way, was twice awarded the Academie Francaise prize Charles Blanc for her histories on Impressionism, notes in her biography of Renoir:

“In Madam Monet on a Sofa, small fluid touches are woven together in clear bright tones. Painted in 1872, the picture is a reference to the craze for Japan that was sweeping Paris (and elsewhere) at the time.”

(*Renoir*, 1990: 49)

While Francesca Castellani, Associate Professor at Iuav University Venice (History of Contemporary Art), describes it thus in her *Renoir: His Life and Works* (1996):

“This portrait of Monet’s wife is like a Japanese silk-screen, embellished with light-filled touches of color. The composition is solidly structured on horizontals and is animated by unexpected small differences in perspective in the dress, which is flattened against the white divan.” (1996, English 1998: 78)

Despite Madame Monet not specifically wearing one, it is an image which echoes those of James Abbott McNeill Whistler and other paintings of European women in kimonos. But this is exactly Renoir’s approach—an absorption of Japanese artistic principles and japonisme themes remade in his own way, usually avoiding a direct transfer of motifs.

Placed side by side with some of Whistler’s well-known paintings, such as ‘Caprice in Purple and Gold: The Golden Screen’ (1864, Smithsonian, National Museum of Asian Art), and ‘Purple and Rose: The Lange Leizen of the Six Marks’ (1864, Philadelphia Museum of Art), one may sense the connection in terms of composition and forms. Except that Renoir has taken a subtler, metaphorical approach, where it is Madame Monet herself, with her blue dress and white sofa, that have been merged into one and transformed implicitly into a ‘Lange Leizen’ (Lijzen)—Dutch meaning ‘Long Ladies’—referring to blue-and-white Chinese porcelain (or Japanese porcelain done in that style), with images of elongated women lacking noticeable bodily contours. Another painting (not shown) where a figure exhibits a fine porcelain quality is ‘In the Rose Garden’ or ‘In the Roses’ (1882, private collection, Las Vegas, not to be mistaken for his other works with a similar title), of a woman sitting on a garden bench. Her face and dress emit a purplish luminosity much like a porcelain figure under a bright light.



Whistler, Purple and Gold, 1864, Smithsonian



Renoir, Camille Monet Reading Le Figaro, c.1874, Gulbenkian



Whistler, Purple and Rose, 1864, PMA

A more literal case of japonisme is ‘Madame Georges Charpentier and her Children’ (1878, Metropolitan Museum of Art, next page), in her ‘Japanese room’ exemplifying the japonaiserie style salon culture and décor of cosmopolitan elites. Besides the numerous Japanese objets d’art, it once again illustrates Renoir’s mix of the two types of Japanese aesthetic; the more diffused, earthy aesthetic provided by the kakemono (hanging scroll) paintings covering the entire back wall, which sets the primary chromatic theme; while the children’s dress in the left foreground balancing with the blue and white porcelain in the right background, together providing the finer, porcelain chromatics to the picture. This was one of the most successful of Renoir’s paintings until then, in no small part due to its integration of Japanese motifs and the chromatic aesthetic that went with it.

It is a piece that squarely merits discussion in the context of the larger japonisme movement, if just for the various Japanese motifs in the picture; yet surprisingly, there are authors such as Distel who skirt all mention of Japan in regard to it. Nothing about the fact that the Charpentiers, generous patrons of Renoir, were Japanophiles—par excellence; and naturally not a word that the room was expressly decorated to be ‘Japanese’. Yet as Robert Herbert, for many years the leading professor of Impressionist art at Yale and later Mount Holyoke College, pointed out:

“The most conspicuous appearance of japonism in his [Renoir’s] own painting is in the large canvas of 1878, Mme. Georges Charpentier and her Children, where the Charpentiers’ own Japanese objects are featured. When exhibited in the Salon of 1879, the painting’s success among critics showed Renoir’s integration of japonism with the tradition of Titian and Delacroix. Of course he spurned the mere imitation of Japanese objects, although he honored the Charpentiers’ contributions to the vogue. What one should admire, he wrote, is the principle observed by Japanese craftspeople, that of inspiration from nature.” (Herbert, 2000: 24).

And it was probably in the Japanese salon that Renoir often “rubbed elbows” with intellectuals known for their keen interest in Japan, such as Emile Zola and Edmond de Goncourt, among a host of others, at Marguerite Charpentier’s prestigious soirées (Herbert, 2000, Preface xiii). Here and elsewhere, Renoir must have also frequently encountered Japanese art—from the collection of the Charpentiers or their friends, certainly those of Monet, and probably others of Renoir’s artistic circle such as Degas, or perhaps the extensive collection of Duret.



Detail of Madame Georges Charpentier and her Children, 1878, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Because of Renoir's rich and thick painterly qualities, with both an intense mixing and mosaic-like distinctiveness of colors, best achieved in oils, his paintings do not ‘feel’ Japanese, despite the influence (but then again, the same could be said of van Gogh). But when we include the chromatic and textural qualities of ceramics, paper crafts, textiles, and other kogeï, alongside the diverse graphic imagery provided by ukiyo-e in print and picture book form, as two distinct artistic sources, we can see how they might fuse together as a powerful imaginative force contributing to the unique character of his art.

That combined aesthetic effect may underlie Renoir’s ‘Seascape’ (1879, Art Institute of Chicago), unusual among his works for its stormy and dynamic nature. This piece, frequently called ‘Wave’ in the literature, will be referred to as such here (even the Art Institute of Chicago’s extensive ‘Cat 8. Seascape, 1879’ commentary by John Collins discusses it under the topic “The Wave in Impressionist Art”). Francesca Castellani, calling it “The Wave”, writes regarding the piece:

“This view which revolves around the impressive, majestic movement of the wave rolling back onto itself, is reminiscent of Courbet’s seascapes: romanticizing the interpretation of the storm, with a solid texture that grows thicker around the crest or the deep blue of the sea. However, one also notes the influence of Japanese prints, such as Hokusai’s wave at Kanagawa.” (*Renoir: His Life and Works*, 1998: 137)

Colin Bailey offers the following insights into the ‘Wave’:

“Anticipating Monet’s ‘coastsapes’ by two years, Renoir’s Wave looked to realist painting and Japanese art as its models.”  
(*Renoir Landscapes: 1865-1883*, The National Gallery, London, 2007: 200)

Noting how Courbet’s seascapes of the late 1860s were one likely inspiration for the painting, Bailey, more balanced in his consideration of sources, also notes that: “although Vollard recalled Renoir dismissing Japanese prints in no uncertain terms, in the 1870s at least he [Renoir] had been sufficiently interested in them to engage in conversations on the subject with no less a connoisseur than Philippe Burty.” And adds with a refreshing forthrightness:



“Hokusai’s Great Wave from the series Thirty-six views of Mount Fuji  
stands as an ukiyo-e godfather to Renoir’s entire series.”

(*Renoir Landscapes: 1865-1883*, 2007: 200)

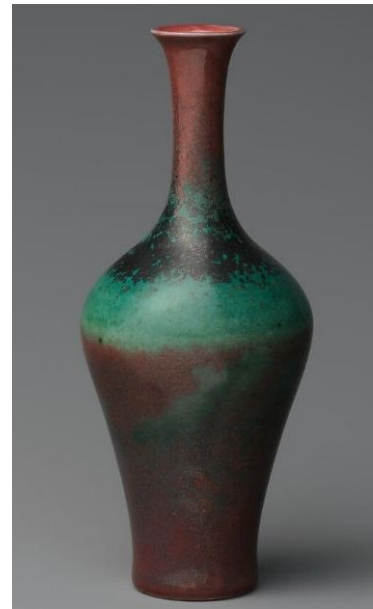
Like Hokusai, who made many other illustrations of waves besides his iconic ‘Great Wave’, scattered throughout his *Manga* or *Modern Designs for Combs and Pipes* Vol.1, so did Renoir, producing waves of differing turbulence and magnitude, in differing proximity and perspective—ranging from ‘The Wave’ (1882, Dixon Gallery and Gardens, Memphis), to his ‘Marine, Guernsey’ (1883, Musée d’Orsay).

Bailey concludes: “It is Renoir’s seamless integration of such sources [i.e., Courbet and Hokusai] in the service of a poetic naturalism that is so impressive here.” Yet we should also point out, as scholars such as Oshima Seiji might have argued, the philosophical underpinnings of Renoir’s mature poetic naturalism probably arose in no small part from his encounter with Japanese art and the worldview he found within it. Jean Renoir, in his biography of his father the painter, provides the following comments his father made, which shed light on the connection between Japan and Renoir’s idea of art as revealing natural beauty through poetic expression:

“There isn’t a person, a landscape, or a subject that doesn’t possess at least some interest—although sometimes more or less hidden. When a painter discovers this hidden treasure, other people immediately exclaim at its beauty. Old Corot opened our eyes to the beauty of the Loing, which is a river like any other; and I am sure that the Japanese landscape is no more beautiful than other landscapes. But the point is that Japanese painters knew how to bring out their hidden treasure.” (*Renoir, My Father*, trans. R. and D. Weaver, Little Brown, 1962: 222).



Renoir, Wave, 1879, Art Institute of Chicago



Makuzu, Vase, 19th century, Edo or Meiji period, MET

What is appealing about Renoir’s painting is that it combines the decorative and the poetic—which may also be considered the defining characteristic of Japanese decorative art. This is not a subjective appraisal; it is at the very least material fact: verse in Japanese kana calligraphy was commonly embedded onto crafted objects, and many craft designs are of an allegorical nature referring to famous lines of poetry. Japan was once essentially a poetic nation, and so it was in Renoir’s eyes.

The palette of Renoir’s ‘Wave’, with its dominating, rich blues with greens, however textured and thickly painted by Renoir, is reminiscent of the colors favored by Hokusai in his landscape scenes. At the same time, they are very much akin to Japanese ceramic glazes and cloisonné enamel which often have a raised, textured aspect, and which produce deep, complex hues and reflections from the application of metals such as silver.

Ceramicists such as Makuzu Kozan and his workshop, part of a vast network of pottery kilns throughout Japan, were exporting such works to Europe precisely at this time. Shown next to Renoir’s ‘Wave’ is the Makuzu ‘Vase’ (19th century, Metropolitan Museum of Art). Though not precisely dated, either from the late Edo or early Meiji period, it is representative of the hues produced then. In either case, well before the Meiji period, from the 17th century, large ceramic

picture plates, known as 'o-zara', made for display, were being abundantly produced, such as 'Ko-Kutani' (old Kutani) wares in 'aode' (青手), characterized by similar combinations of blues, greens, with either yellow and/or whites, where waves are a classic design pattern. Ceramics such as these were among the exports from Japan in the Meiji era. For the sake of reference, it should be mentioned that Japanese earthenware tea bowls of greater antiquity also share something in common with Renoir's wave paintings. Among the works of the versatile Honami Koetsu (1558–1637), key figure in the development of Japanese design aesthetics, is his tea bowl 'Fujisan' (early 17th century, Sunritz Hattori Museum, Hakone), a designated 'national treasure' of Japan. Its archetypal design has influenced tea ceremony ceramics down the centuries, and although considered to symbolize the famous Mount Fuji, it also conveys the impression of a vast, turbulent ocean that strikes a kindred psychological chord to Renoir's 'Wave'.

Another Renoir piece using very different colors, but also possessing a ceramic quality is his 'Garden in the rue Cortot, Montmartre' (1876, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh). Christopher Riopelle, Curator of Post-1800 Paintings at the National Gallery, London, discussing Monet's influence on "the collapse of the space between foreground and middle ground" in the work, observes:

"That spatial effect, along with the insistently vertical format of the canvas and the absence of horizon, also suggest a decorative intent not unrelated to such characteristics of Japanese prints as pictorial flatness." (*Renoir Landscapes: 1865 - 1883*, The National Gallery, London, 2007: 184)

The flatness, the 'insistently vertical format', the absence of horizon, the generally decorative effect, as well as the combination of bright coloring on a subdued mixed tone backdrop, is also, by the way, quite reminiscent of Meiji era Japanese ceramic floral designs, such as those enameled on patinated bronze.

As an example, next to Renoir's 'Garden in rue Cortot', we have placed a piece by Hayashi Kodenji and/or his workshop, 'A Cloisonné Vase' (late 19th century, private collection, auctioned by Christie's in 2012, formerly part of the Avo Krikorian Collection, image Christie's). Hayashi Kodenji was another of those Meiji era virtuoso ceramicists, whose works were in high demand in Europe. Christie's description follows:

"Worked in various thicknesses of silver wire and coloured cloisonné enamels on a dark blue ground with a maple tree surrounded by a profusion of flowers including chrysanthemums, irises, wild pinks and grasses, the foot with floral lappets, the neck with a band of geometric pattern, silver rims." (<https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5561082>)



Renoir, Garden in the rue Cortot, 1876, Carnegie Museum of Art



Hayashi Kodenji Workshop, A Cloisonné Vase, late 19th cent., private coll.

While the background is a pure, lacquer-like black (one can imagine a similar piece with a bronze patinated backdrop or mixed glaze), the resemblance here is nevertheless astonishing, in both overall compositional character and density, and in decorative details. Though not critical for the comparison, we could note that even Renoir's tree and its branches, though bare, are reminiscent of the thin trunked, forked Kodenji-style of trees; and close to the ground one can observe in both the clusters of straight-shooting growth. A thin trunked, forked tree with its two branches broken, by the way, is a standard motif in suiboku painting (e.g., Kubo Shunman's scroll paintings from the Bunka-era, 1804-1818). Whether accidental or not, they attest to a striking affinity of decorative style.

Seen in this light, Renoir's 'Wave', in terms of its 'ceramic aesthetic', though different in every other respect from the Garden, provides an interesting juxtaposition to it, along with these Japanese ceramic pieces. While the Garden conveys quiet and stillness in a format and color scheme almost diametrically opposed to the dynamic 'Wave', which is a landscape work, the two nevertheless have a compatible decorative effect characteristic of Japan.

If we wish to focus more upon the purely ceramic quality of Renoir's paintings, we find it often manifests itself strongly in the backdrop of his subject matter. His 'Tama, the Japanese Dog', (1876, Clark Art Institute), also the subject of a Manet painting, belonging to that great collector of Japanese art, Henri Cernuschi, provides an excellent example of this. By the way, the painting also demonstrates once again, the breadth of japanalia integrated into Renoir's art, extending to flora and fauna. We find the presence not only of porcelains, fans, umbrellas, and hanging scrolls in his work, but also Japanese chins (Tama's breed) and a variety of Japanese chrysanthemums, which will be discussed shortly.

Compare the background in 'Tama' with the detail of 'Flower Vase' (late 18th century) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Object no. 91.1.270, second image) to the right of the pet portrait. This type of Satsuma ware, covered with mottled glaze, produces a chromatic effect remarkably similar to that of Renoir's backdrop.



Renoir, Tama the Japanese Dog, 1876, Clark Art Institute



Detail of Satsuma ware, Flower Vase, late 18<sup>th</sup> cent., MET

Depending on the lighting, if in a typical lamp-lit room, where 'Tama' originally would have been hung, or during the day in such a room reflecting light from European furnishings and decor, the hues and tone of the painting would probably seem even closer to the MET's Satsuma vase.

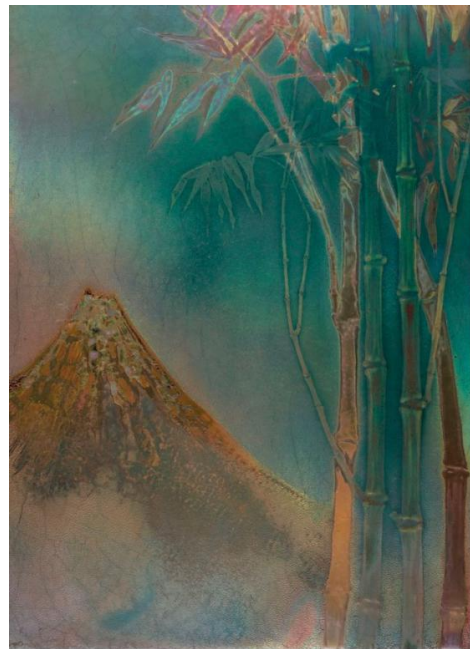
Satsuma, however, is not the most renowned of ceramics associated with this 'tsuchi-aji' ('earthen tastes') aesthetic. The vase is but one that could be chosen from many thousands like it in appearance, in endless variations of a theme, coming from a variety of regional kilns. More in the earthen taste are other regional pottery styles, such as Tokoname, Bizen, Karatsu, Iga, or Shigaraki, to name a few, using techniques such as 'hi-iro' (火色 literally 'fire coloring' from iron oxidization), 'koge' (こげ 'burnt' from carbon trapping), and especially 'hai-kaburi' (灰かぶり, ash glaze), where the kiln's wood-ash creates a richly textured glaze with earthy tones in endless gradations of muted greens, blue-greys, yellows, oranges, iron browns and black. Unlike porcelain, earthen pottery and high-fired stoneware, where these characteristics are most notable, are indigenous to Japan, with their roots in prehistoric times. Specific regional kilns or styles, such as Tokoname, established in the Nara period (8th century), are estimated to have reached approximately 3,000 individual kilns in their heyday, during the Kamakura period, centered in the 14th century (Idekawa Naoki, *Yakimono no Kantei-nyumon*, Shinchosha, 1983).



A good amount of research has been done on the arrival of the full range of Japanese ceramics in France during the latter 19th century, notably Imai Yuko's *Togei no japonisumu* (*The Japonisme of Ceramics*, Nagoya University, 2016), as well as being exhibited, such as by the Philadelphia Museum of Art: 'Firing the Imagination: Japanese Influence on French Ceramics, 1860-1910' (Aug. 2024- Aug. 2025). Renoir was not alone in his probable assimilation of Japanese kogeï aesthetics. He was part of a shared awakening among European artists, though ahead of many, and perhaps more subtle and transformative in his incorporation of Japanese ceramic derived chromatics into his work. His rich range of greens from a near luminescent aquamarine to a lighter yellow-green in his 'Jeune filles à la corbeille de fleurs' (c.1890, private collection, image Wikimedia Commons), which follows, seems to reflect the popularity of such hues that adorned a great quantity of Meiji export ceramics flowing into Europe. These were emulated by European ceramic artists, as is evident in the piece shown below to the right, 'View of Mount Fuji' (1900/01, Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal) by Clément Massier.



Renoir, Jeune filles à la corbeille de fleurs, c. 1890, private collection



Massier, View of Mount Fuji, 1900/01, Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal

While possessing the radiance of porcelain, the young girl is also the personification of the natural environment about her: the wave of her falling hair not unlike the bend of nearby branches, her pink touched dress glows more than her flowers, and her green sash concentrates the chromatic spectrum of vegetal growth from her surroundings. Those surroundings are close to her, an amorphous, intimate presence, which the girl leans on—or rather it seems to press up against her gently—with a softness like the girl herself. Are Renoir's female portraits and floral depictions, each a kind of metamorphosis of the other, his flowers a kind of feminine portraiture, and vice versa? Is it a cliché because it is so true?

The 'Portrait of the Actress Jeanne Samary' (1877/78, Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow), shown next, has both a porcelain-like brilliance and floral freshness in one; the 'Bouquet of Chrysanthemums and a Japanese Fan' (1880, Pushkin), center, shares something of it. The pink background has an astonishing intensity and melds and meshes together with the head of Jeanne Samary, into one inseparable 'human bouquet'. The vase = the dress, the flowers = the woman; —a simple equation, but perhaps true, and in Renoir's work the repeated appearance of Japanese chrysanthemums and vases suggest they have a meaningful place in that vision of beauty.

To the right, though not a ceramic piece, we have placed Kitagawa Utamaro's 'Stone Bridge' (1801, Art Institute of Chicago) for perspective, depicting a scene from kabuki theater. Here too, we see a meshing together of pink flowers and a woman with pink hair (in fact part of her costume) into one, analogous to, but more literally than, Renoir. But who knows, it might be a hypothesis to test—that is, to scan the Samary picture for underlayers, to see if one might actually find something like it there.



Renoir, Jeanne Samary, 1877/78, Pushkin



Renoir, Chrysanthemums and Japanese Fan, 1880, Pushkin



Utamaro, Stone Bridge, 1801/02, AIC

Among the Art Institute of Chicago's meticulously researched papers and insightful descriptions of its holdings, regarding 'Chrysanthemums' (1881/82, shown on the following page, center), under the heading 'Chrysanthemum: Flower of the Artist-Gardener', John B. Collins speaks of how chrysanthemums are a complementary aspect of Renoir's japonisme:

"As *Chrysanthemums* attests, Renoir's interest in the flower as an artistic subject can be dated to at least the early 1880s. He may have had the opportunity to admire paintings of the flower by Claude Monet made in 1878 and 1881. A bouquet of chrysanthemum blossoms provides an extraordinarily ebullient setting for Renoir's painting of the red-haired model Jeanne Samary, *A Girl with a Fan*, circa 1881. In this case the flowers complement the taste for Japonisme suggested by the fan in Samary's hand." (*Renoir Paintings and Drawings*, Cat. 15. Chrysanthemums, 1881/82 at [publications.artic.edu/renoir](http://publications.artic.edu/renoir))

What follows is an excellent synopsis of Renoir's 'Chrysanthemum' in the historical context of the Japanese flower's adaptation into French culture:

"First imported to France from the Far East during the French Revolution, chrysanthemums are a late summer flower appreciated for their strong scent and exceptional range of color and shape. Referenced in Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (Remembrance of Things Past), in the early twentieth century they were still considered an exotic Japanese feature of French gardens. Notably, Renoir's *Chrysanthemums* includes two blossom varieties, each with different color and petal shape—the orange starburst variety with a long, straight petal and the white blossom variety with a shorter, denser petal that gives it a spherical appearance." (Ibid.)

Collins further identifies Renoir's painting as related to specific Hokusai images, and its strong connection to japonisme:

"This mixture of blossom varieties is a feature of the celebrated Japanese woodblock print by Hokusai, *Chrysanthemums and Bee* and further adds to the Japonisme of Renoir's painting. In Hokusai's print the distinctive flat leaf of the chrysanthemum provides visual contrast with the intricate blossoms. The leaf plays an analogous role in Renoir's *Chrysanthemums*, which takes full advantage of the color and textural potential of the celebrated flower to produce a still-life painting of sublime authority." (Ibid.)

Moreover, Renoir's underdrawings reflect Japanese-inspired spatial arrangements, with flattened planes, and as pointed out above, he shared the Japanese appreciation for the plant's distinctive forms, combining different blossom types within a single arrangement, as apparent in his three works on the following page. From the number and intensity of his paintings of Japanese chrysanthemums, it is clear they possessed a unique aesthetic significance for him, resulting in works with a chromatic and textural quality that does not appear with such richness in his other floral still-lives.

His chrysanthemum 'portraits' may be interpreted as an oil paint version of the Japanese decorative idea of 'kiku-zukushi', a term somewhat unamenable to transliteration, meaning something like 'utterly chrysanthemum' or 'chrysanthemum packed' or 'nothing untouched by chrysanthemums'—it embodies an 'élan vital'—exuberant and life-loving design. This is truly classic Japanese imagery, often applied to kimonos, porcelain, maki-e lacquerware, and painting, and Renoir captures the spirit of it well. A Kinkozan 'Bowl in Thousand Flower Pattern' (late 1800s, Peabody Essex Museum, [image Wikimedia Commons](http://www.wikimedia.org)), which is on the subdued side of its type, is shown below. While the year of manufacture is unknown, Kinkozan was exporting its wares to Europe from the early 1870s, and the bowl gives some conception of the packed and overflowing, yet at the same time intricate quality of Japanese floral design coming into Europe around the time Renoir was painting his chrysanthemums.





Renoir, Vase of Chrysanthemums, c. 1884, Musée des Beaux-Arts Rouen



Renoir, Chrysanthemums, 1881/82, Art Institute of Chicago



Renoir, Bouquet of Chrysanthemums, 1881, MET



Kinkozan, Bowl in Thousand Flower Pattern, late 1800s, Peabody Essex Museum

The brightening of color, that vital characteristic of Impressionism, was famously described by Théodore Duret in his defining work on Impressionist painters (*Les Peintres impressionnistes*, 1878). Japanese prints, he said, opened the eyes of artists to seeing the world of color about them in a completely different way. “Before Japan it was impossible;” (p.13)—this was a catalyst for a revolution in perception, not simply something that justified a change already in motion, as some would have it. To Duret in 1878 there were only five Impressionists: Monet, Sisley, Pissarro, Renoir and Morisot, and he naturally meant this applied to all five of them. We shall not repeat his memorable words here because they have been quoted often; only to add that Duret also explains his reason for the exclusion of certain other painters from the group as due to the fact that they were “strict naturalists who remained outside the influence of Japan” (“des naturalistes purs restés en dehors de l’influence du Japon” 1878: p.31), thus implying that Japanese influence was a key criterion for inclusion into his exclusive group of artists, which of course applied to Renoir as well. This incontrovertible logic seems to be lost at present, where second-hand consensus appears to take precedence over first-hand testimony. The Impressionist awakening to color is discussed by Gabriel Weisberg in the following terms:

“The freshness of Japanese color thus inspired French painters to seek color boldly in their observation of the motif. This is particularly true of Monet, most of whose works in the sixties were not particularly bright, since he was seeking a harmony of light. In 1871 he bought a number of Japanese prints in Holland (earlier he was too poor to acquire them personally), and his color immediately became brighter.” (*Japonisme*, 1975: 118)

Likewise when we look at Renoir’s ‘Spring Bouquet’ (1866, Harvard Art Museums, © Fellows and Trustees of Harvard College, shown on the following page), done early in his career, and compare it to his later works, such as those above, the contrast is apparent. Harvard’s gallery text describes ‘Spring Bouquet’ in the following terms: “This exuberant bouquet in a Japanese vase from early in Renoir’s career attests to the artist’s engagement with past historical traditions.” — Referring to Dutch still life traditions, and the works of 18th century French painters such as Watteau and Boucher. While Harvard’s commentator calls it ‘exuberant’, and perhaps so when viewed in isolation, relatively speaking, it has a more subdued, realist quality than his later works. And it pales in comparison on the scale of exuberance to his chrysanthemum depictions coming after his shared encounter with Monet and other contemporaries of Japanese art.

But it should also be noted that the asymmetrical arrangement of the flowers, flowing over en masse to one side, descending and hanging lower than the vase itself in ‘kakebana’ style—a classic type of ‘ikebana’ or traditional flower arrangement—hints at early Japanese influence upon Renoir. Such floral arrangements were depicted in woodblock prints, and ikebana instructional guides, widely distributed at the time, were frequently part of European collections, often reproduced in early illustrated books on Japan.





Spring Bouquet, 1866, Harvard Art Museums



Roses and Peonies, 1876, Dallas Art Museum

For added comparison, to the right is ‘Roses and Peonies in a Vase’ (1876, Dallas Museum of Art), a work which rests in between his chrysanthemums of the 1880s and the ‘Spring Bouquet’ of the 1860s on our scale of exuberance. Once again, the vase appears to be Japanese or Chinese, or one inspired by the East, with an irregular type of design associated with Japan, which seems to take priority as subject matter over the flowers; in any case the eye goes there first, and rests there longer than with the flowers (this vase reappears at least twice in his oeuvre). The museum commentary describes it thus:

“Here a bouquet of peonies, rosebuds, and a few other flowers burst forth from the column of a blue ceramic vase decorated with an Asian floral motif. The arrangement is precariously balanced on a dark table set within a furnished interior complete with plush red armchair and a painting in a gilded frame. Renoir played with the colors and textures of these elements, creating a continuum between the cut flowers and floral motifs on the vase and the painting in the background.” (Dallas Museum of Art website, Collections, at dma.org)

Unlike his chrysanthemum creations, the flowers require ‘bolstering’, if you will, with additional elements to create maximal artistic impact. We see the movement towards greater brightness, but the chromatic fullness of his later works has not yet been achieved, and it confirms the sense that his choice of Japanese chrysanthemums was essential in bringing out the painterly qualities he was striving for. Chrysanthemums were, in other words, not merely a change of subject matter, but possibly, a necessary vehicle in reaching his ideal of color.

The ceramic and the floral—two faces of a certain japonisme aesthetic—appear intimately related as an artistic stimulus for Renoir. In fact, the shared character of their color is more than ‘skin-deep’. While seemingly highly reflective in sunlight, they both have what may be referred to as ‘subsurface translucency’—where light does not simply bounce off as it does from flat painted surfaces, but rather penetrates the surface to produce a glow suspended within the material. Petals and porcelain both possess luminous depth—a warm luster and silky softness—together with that outstanding vividness of hues.

It was precisely these qualities that Japanese horticulturalists consciously sought to enhance in their pursuit of the flower arts—‘engei’ (園芸), and were no different in their attention to detail and in the pursuit of excellence as ceramicists were in theirs. It was this same cultural milieu that gave rise to Imari porcelain, and made Kakiemon wares prized by European nobility in the 18th century, as Japanese chrysanthemums would be in the 19th. It was this attainment of nothing less than ‘chromatic virtuosity’ that must be understood as one of the motivating forces behind the heralding of ‘Japonisme’ in Europe. Despite the attempt by contemporary art historians to dismiss it as a kind of momentary flight of fancy, it was for good reason why the great artistic spirits of the age were so fascinated by things Japanese. Among the most compelling, this chromatic virtuosity was one. But flowers and their vases lie at opposite ends of every other measure: one supple and ephemeral to an extreme, the other rigid and as close to immortality as there is among things man-made.

Thus the floral and ceramic went hand in hand, resulting in a synergistic japonisme. Returning to the porcelain aspect, indications of a conscious artistic connection between the visual and ceramic arts can be found in paintings of the time, just as a link between literature and ukiyo-e is suggested by Manet’s portrait of Emile Zola (1868). Regarding Henri Fantin-Latour’s ‘A Studio in the Batignolles Quarter’ (1870, Musée d’Orsay), Weisberg, in his book on French japonisme, describes the painting and its significance:

“We should also recognize that there was some relationship between the decorative and the fine arts. An early testimony of this is Fantin-Latour’s painting *A Studio in the Batignolles Quarter*, 1870, where Manet is surrounded by, among others, Renoir, Astruc, Bazille, and Monet. ... The interest of this Impressionist circle in Japanese art has already been expounded upon, so we might almost take it for granted the Oriental-looking vase at the far left with its dragon decoration, save that the vase is actually French and was made by one of the first Japonistes, Laurent Bouvier.” (*Japonisme*, 1975: 146)

He goes further to note that many of the better-known French ceramicists at the time started out as painters, and thus closely intertwined were the two—ceramics and painting—in authorship and aesthetic inspiration.

Concerning the subjects in the Fantin-Latour painting, sometimes referred to as the ‘Batignolles Group’, John Rewald recounts how they were even called “the Japanese painters” at one time, according to Jules-Antoine Castagnary, the French art critic favorable to the Impressionists (in Rewald, 1973: 208). Even those in Renoir’s wider circle of artist colleagues, such as the artist Gustave Caillebotte, who became both outing comrade and kind supporter, generally identified as a sitter for his painting ‘*Luncheon of the Boating Party*’ (1880-81, Phillips Collection, DC, to be discussed), made frequent use of Japanese artistic principles and motifs. Kirk Varnedoe (chief curator of painting and sculpture at MoMA for many years), in his *Gustave Caillebotte* (Yale, 1987), illustrates this aspect of the artist’s works, as do others. Thus even if Renoir himself was not a vocal advocate of the Japonisme movement, there is no denying he was completely surrounded by its adherents and quite immersed—virtually submerged—in it socially and intellectually.

As we have suggested from the beginning, there are various clues to be found of Japanese ceramic inspired, *transmedia* influences upon Renoir. In ‘*Bouquet in a Vase*’ (1878, Indianapolis Museum of Art, French title: ‘*Bouquet de fleurs au vase japonais*’), shown below to the left, we have what is likely to be a Meiji period Satsuma export piece, with the typical white serpents/dragons in relief, writhing about on a rich red surface with gold decorative medallions, that probably depict small scenes of the Orient, of figures or perhaps mythical animals. Unlike his chrysanthemum paintings however, it is the vessel, rather than the flowers that stand out—the flowers themselves lack conviction. We might add that the vase very much recalls the kimono in Monet’s painting of *Madame Monet as a ‘japonaise’*. Renoir seems to have been fond of its design, because he paints it again in ‘*Peonies*’ (1878, private collection), where the flowers are portrayed in a livelier manner.

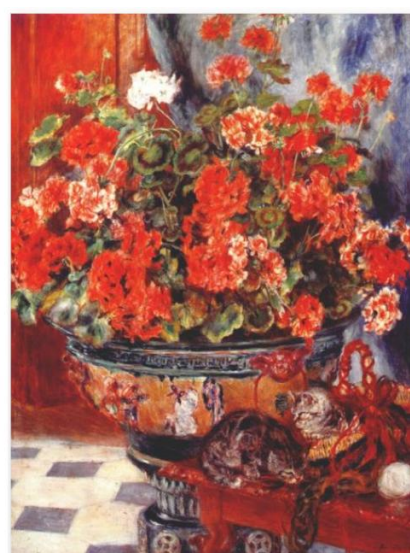
In the center is Renoir’s ‘*Young Woman in Red Dress*’ (c. 1892, Tokyo Fuji Art Museum); and to the right is his ‘*Geranium and Cats*’ (1881, private collection). A wide ceramic pot, possibly a Satsuma-yaki jardiniere, holds the geraniums, and is decorated with figures in relief that can be faintly discerned; one figure in white kneeling and pleading towards a standing figure, it seems. The cats have brocaded collars/leashes, in red—the classic color of Japanese cat collars, depicted in countless ukiyo-e prints, and the picture is filled with reds with white accents distributed throughout. This image, together with the ‘*Bouquet in a Vase*’ on the left, red with their touches of white, create a surrounding not incongruous with the central painting of the ‘*Young Woman in Red Dress*’, which, like the two images on each side, is lightened by touches of white and areas of yellow tinted beige.



Bouquet in a Vase, 1878, IMA



Young Woman in Red Dress, c. 1892, FAM



Geraniums and Cats, 1881, private coll., Wikiart

But recall also, how the Japanese fan—the sensu folding fan and the roundish fixed uchiwa fan—were extremely apropos symbols of the ‘sui-sai’ or watercolor-like, diffused aspect of the ‘kogeï aesthetic’ that worked its way into Renoir’s paintings. As mentioned earlier, regarding ‘Still Life with Bouquet’ (1871), the first painting of Renoir’s we looked at, Weisberg wrote that it “shows how the color of a Japanese fan can set the tone for a whole painting.” (*Japonisme*, 1975: 118) In his ‘Young Woman in Red Dress’ above, though a fan is nowhere to be seen, we nevertheless detect the presence of that aesthetic element.

## Part II

Up to this point, we have dwelt upon the world of Japanese objects and decorative influences—the impact of ‘kogeï aesthetics’ on Renoir’s chromatic sensibilities. But that would not give us a full picture of ‘Renoir’s Japonisme’. We have seen much ‘frosting’—but only half, or should we say a third, of what constituted the ‘filling’. And unless we look to these other aspects of his relationship to Japanese art, we may not be fully convinced of the former, nor appreciate how decorative sensibilities worked in tandem with other Japanese designs in the making of his artistry. We are speaking of thematic, compositional, and figural adaptations, a few of which we have already seen as they relate to the decorative aspects of his work, but now we look further, and see how Japanese artistic models are applied to his conceptions of nudes, social genre works, and landscapes. That process, it will be argued, would culminate in his absorption of Japanese graphic art sensibilities as well. The final, major aspect of Japanese influence, Renoir’s philosophical alignment with what he imagined Japan to be, will be left to the end—synthesizing and shedding light on the examples in the preceding sections from both the arts and crafts.

We will not discuss here in depth observations on Renoir and Japan found elsewhere, only to mention a few more examples. As Oshima notes, in Maurice Sérullaz’s overview of the Impressionist movement, *L’Impressionisme* (1961), Renoir’s ‘The First Outing’ (1876-77, National Gallery, London), ‘After the Luncheon’ (1879, Städel Museum, Frankfurt), ‘Acrobats at the Cirque Fernando’ (1879, Art Institute of Chicago, alluded to earlier), or ‘La Place Clichy’ (c. 1880, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge) are raised as instances of Renoir’s absorption of Japanese compositional techniques. Sérullaz comments how in contrast to the acceptance of Degas and Lautrec’s compositional shifting as being inspired by Japanese prints, this is “something that surprises people in the case of Renoir” (in Oshima, *Japonisme*, 1992: 189-190). Regarding ‘La Place Clichy’, the Fitzwilliam Museum, which holds it, describes:

“The blurring of the background crowd scene against the more clearly defined principal figure may owe something to photography, although the steep perspective also suggests that he may have been influenced by Japanese ukiyo-e.” (<https://french-impressionists.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk>)

In the case of ‘After the Luncheon’—and we should add Renoir’s ‘Conversation’ (1879, Nationalmuseum Stockholm)—the composition is definitely in a style reminiscent of ukiyo-e prints, such as those by Kitagawa Utamaro. A few examples of Utamaro’s characteristic de-centering, bold cropping, unconventional framing, and flattened pictorial space follow, both from the renowned lithographer Henri Rivière’s collection of Japanese prints, now held at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BnF) in Paris, in their department of prints and photos.

On the left is ‘Chirinuruwowaka’ (1793, BnF), from the series *Iroha zoroë*, which shows a remarkable modernity of composition considering it was designed in the 18th century. It shares with Renoir’s ‘Conversation’ (1879, Nationalmuseum Stockholm), shown below it, not only its organizational conception, but also the doting fondness of the woman for her male companion, charmingly expressed in Utamaro and in Renoir with different gestures, as well as the male figure’s less ardent interest in his female counterpart, and avoidance of eye contact.

To the right is ‘Matsubaya Seyama Iroka Yukari’ (1789-1799, BnF), from the series *Mu Tamagawa* (translated as ‘Six Jewel Rivers’ at MFA Boston). Here the kimonos of the two female courtesans spread out in a space where wall and floor merge into one golden plane. One in the forefront facing away from us is still a child in apprenticeship with toys nearby, the other a sister or mother-like figure; their kimonos spread out in multiple directions. The impression received from this image might be compared to ‘Madam Monet and her Son Jean in the Garden at Argenteuil’ (1874, National Gallery of Art, DC) shown below it. Lesley Stevenson, in her *Renoir* (1991), considers this painting of a mother and son outdoors, as a prime example of Renoir’s incorporation of Japanese compositional and spatial ambiguities:



“Renoir has represented the figures of Camille Doncieux and Jean Monet from above and the effect is of a very enclosed environment. In this very flat, two-dimensional picture space he has used the kind of spatial ambiguities that French artists found in Japanese prints. Indeed, the decorative aspect of the work is quite stunning and all of the objects contained within the picture space are carefully balanced. The rooster is introduced to this end and the red of its comb reacts to dramatic effect with the bright green grass.” (1991: 82)



Utamaro, Chirinuruwowa, 1789-1799, BnF



Utamaro, Matsubaya Seyama Iroka Yukari, 1793, BnF

We can see the rooster which stands rigidly upright, plays the role of the toys in Utamaro's 'Matsubaya Seyama Iroka Yukari'. The boy, Monet's son, with his spread legs achieves the effect of Utamaro's girl in the foreground with her back to us, sprawled on her front side with her kimono spreading to the edge of the picture frame like the boy's feet. Madame Monet corresponds to the larger figure in Utamaro's composition, with Utamaro's cropping of the kimono on the right edge echoed in Renoir's cropping of the dress on the bottom edge; and whether or not with this specific Utamaro in mind, the allusive nature of the picture to Japanese ukiyo-e is suggested by the sensu fan in her hand, with its classic Japanese-style tripartite diagonal bleeding pattern, arched in layers from top left to lower right, the center white or uncolored (e.g. Utagawa Kunisada's actor print, 'Onoe Kikugoro as Ronin Matagoro', 1823, The Japonisme Museum, Kyoto, shown in the Appendix).



Renoir, Conversation, 1879, Nationalmuseum Stockholm



Renoir, Madam Monet and her Son ... at Argenteuil, 1874, National Gallery of Art

Stevenson follows with further commentary on the influence of Monet, though that too, in this case, might be considered something in part nurtured by his absorption of Japanese print compositions. The pose of the boy is also reminiscent of a Hokusai manga pose (in *Manga* Vol. 1, 1814) which seems to have fascinated a number of Impressionist painters from Edouard Manet to Mary Cassatt (see National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo, ed., *Hokusai and Japonisme*, Yomiuri Shinbun, 2017, image in Appendix).

Utamaro's 'Oshichi the Greengrocer's Daughter, Kichisaburo the Boy Servant, and Dozaemon Denkichi' (1798-1800, MFA Boston), from the series *Models of Love Talk: Clouds Form over the Moon*, shown below, center, skillfully creates a sense of deep psychological divide between the two young figures and the older male directly behind them, despite their close clustering. This is achieved not only by the contorted expression of the male looking in a different direction, but also by the device of the thin 'fusuma' or sliding panel, which allows such an effect more easily than a thick swinging door would among standing people.

This ukiyo-e 'disjointedness in proximity' is employed by Renoir in his 'Au café', (c. 1877, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands), the first painting which comes to mind, shown below, right. The image, from Wikimedia Commons, has been tint adjusted to approach the original, which is much more blue/green. The intimacy of the two women, their faces as if pressed together, who are in their own, empathetic world, while the men hover about nearby, looking or moving in different directions and planes, is very much in the Utamaro style. But so too, and perhaps more successfully, though less immediately evident and with greater impact, does his earlier and better known 'La Loge' (1874, Courtauld Institute of Art, London), create such an effect of psychological disjointedness by the same methods. A woman in a vertically striped dress (Renoir's model Nini Lopez), is with her male companion (modeled by Renoir's brother) just behind her. He is crammed in, literally 'boxed in' to the upper right-hand corner, just as the fusuma panel and outer frame of the picture do to the man (Denkichi) in Utamaro.

The main female subject in Renoir looks at us, so at least there is a psychological pairing with the viewer, and an ostracization of the male figure, of 'us' (the woman and the viewer) versus him. This is the same effect achieved in Utamaro by the cheek-to-cheek intimacy of the couple completely oblivious to the man behind them, who is being shut off by the fusuma sliding panel, and the sense of ostracization is of course evident in his unsociable expression and augmented by his glance in the opposite direction, despite being in extreme proximity. In Renoir's composition, not only is the male character staring off in another direction, but the device of the binoculars obviously increases the sense of psychological distance from his female companion.

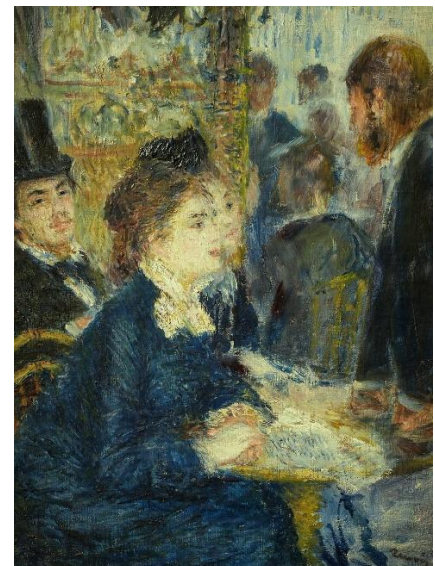
The contribution of Japanese-style tight, up-close cropping, with vividly contrasting angles and asymmetry, is critical in producing the unique psychological and aesthetic impact of 'La Loge'—without which we would simply have another fine realist work. Imagine, for a moment, the viewpoint set back significantly in a compositional style before the arrival of Japanese prints: we would end up with a pretty, picturesque row of theater boxes and the man with the binoculars giving it a touch of 18th century style caricature.



Renoir, La Loge, 1874, © The Courtauld  
The Courtauld Institute of Art



Utamaro, Oshichi, Kichisaburo, Denkichi, 1798-1800  
Museum of Fine Arts Boston



Renoir, Au café, c. 1877, Wikimedia Commons  
Kröller-Müller Museum

Little attention, by the way, has been paid to the possibility that the French fashion for broad vertical stripes, a standard of daily-wear kimono from the 18th century, and prominently featured in ukiyo-e prints, may have been a result of Japanese influence. This might shed more light on the significance of the striped dress—if she was flaunting her modernity in the sense associated with Japan; for japonisme was no less important in the development of modern fashions than it was in modern art. A good amount of work has been conducted by researchers such as Akiko Fukai (director of the Kyoto Costume Institute) and Akiko Savas on the subject. The milestone 1996 Paris exposition 'Japonisme et Mode 1870-1996', held at the Palais Galliera, traced that general influence from before the time of Renoir's 'La Loge' to recent history. Arisa



Yamaguchi's *Sartorial Japonisme and the Experience of Kimonos in Britain 1865-1914* (Routledge, 2024) tracks the process from early on in Britain, indicating it was a widespread phenomenon in Western Europe. Japanese designs—from actual kimonos, katagami stencil patterns, and/or ukiyo-e prints—were seeping into Parisian fashions from the 1860s onward, as Esther Sünderhauf relates in 'The Influence of Japonisme on the Parisian Fashion Journals 1860-1900' (Von Parish Costume Library, Münchner Stadtmuseum, 2020). Fashion designs incorporating vertical stripes are given as examples by Sünderhauf (see in her article Fig. 6a, Beach costume, and Fig. 12a, Dress with stripes in blue and brown). The point here is not who invented the stripe; it is one thing to say that stripes might have existed in the West before the coming of Japonisme, and quite another thing to explain how they became considered fashionable wear among status-conscious women of the latter 19th century.

Two prints shown below, one by Utagawa Kuniyoshi and another by Utagawa Kunitomi (国富 c.1804-1844), are representative of the bold stripes that were a popular motif in ukiyo-e. As in Renoir's 'La Loge', they are often portrayed in a massed, bulky form, accentuating the visual impact of the stripes. In the case of the 'Benkei stripes' to the left, flower-like balls ('bonten' 梵天) on a wide band ('kesa' 袈裟) are worn hanging down on the chest somewhat reminiscent of the ermine stole and pink flowers over the bodice in 'La Loge'.



Kuniyoshi, Ichikawa Danjuro as Musashinobo Benkei, 1849  
The Japonisme Museum, Kyoto



Kunitomi, Ogiya no uchi Han-ogi, c. 1820-1844  
The Japonisme Museum, Kyoto

Whether or not this particular fashion or Renoir's choice to paint it was a result of Japanese influence, it is certain that the exposure to and interest in kimonos was spreading in France from the 1860s into the 1870s, exemplified by the growing number of stage performances in Japanese or Japan-inspired dress. Zacharie Astruc, a member of the Batignolles group, sitting next to Manet with Renoir standing just beyond him in the Fantin-Latour painting we saw earlier, and a good friend of Renoir, wrote a Japanese fantasy *L'Île de la Demoiselle*, performed in front of private audiences from 1865 (or possibly from 1863); Léon de Rosny's *Le Couvent du Dragon Vert*, said to be based on the play *Seiryuji*, was staged publicly at the Athénée Oriental in 1871. Camille Saint-Saëns followed with an opéra comique, *La Princesse Jaune* (1872), about a Japanese princess. And in the same year Renoir was painting 'La Loge', Ernest d'Hervilly wrote a one-act play in verse, *La Belle Sainara* (1874). More on the subject can be found in Hiroshima Jogakuin University Professor Ronald D. Klein's 'Images of Meiji Japan on the Western Stage' [Acts I & II] (*Eigo Eibei bungaku kenkyu*, No. 19, 2011: 1-38), to mention but one source.

Pursuing this line of fashion-related history any further, however, would open up an entirely new discussion beyond the scope of this study. Only to say that the idea of the vertical stripe as ukiyo-e imagery seems to have been so strongly associated in the European artistic imagination that Joan Miró, many years later, still recognized the connection in his painting 'Portrait of E.C. Ricart' (1917, private collection). Depicting a man in a conspicuously striped outfit from head to toe, with a large Japanese print in the background, Miró's painting can be fruitfully compared to Kunisada's 'Iseta Restaurant' from the series *Famous Restaurants of the Eastern Capital* (c. 1852).

Returning to the general influence of ukiyo-e imagery and its delineations on Renoir, Robert Herbert, regarding Renoir's painting 'Nursing' (or otherwise 'Aline Nursing her Son Pierre'/'Aline and her son Pierre', 1886, private collection, image Wikimedia Commons), recounts that:

"When Renoir's *Nursing* (*Aline and her son Pierre*) was exhibited in 1886, it was greeted by one friendly critic as though he had drawn three of Renoir's favored comparisons from the artist's *Grammar*. He asked the viewer to admire in the picture the charm of the primitives, the clarity of the Japanese and the mastery of Ingres." (*Nature's Workshop*, 2000: 68)



The reference to “the clarity of the Japanese” most likely refers to the clear outlines, distinct colors, and vivid composition of Japanese woodblock prints (characteristics which also remind us of ‘La Loge’). That is to say, besides Renoir’s high regard for Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres and the stimulus of the then ascendant Primitivism movement, Renoir may have experimented with the clear definition characteristic of ukiyo-e prints, and probably other paintings of his could be analyzed in the same light, such as ‘The Daughters of Catulle Mendès’ (1888, Metropolitan Museum of Art). Mendès, it is worth noting, wrote one of the first French sonnets on Japan—an homage to it, ‘Ten-si-o-dai-tsin’ (i.e. Tensho-daijin/天照大神, 1863; William L. Schwartz, ‘Japan in French Poetry’, *PMLA*, Vol. 40, No. 2, June 1925, pp. 435-449), and certainly would have been pleased to have his daughters painted in a Japanese style. And once again, we encounter a Renoir patron who is an ardent Japanophile.

Other paintings to be considered are ‘La Promenade’ (1875-76, Frick Collection, New York); ‘La Coiffure’ (1888, Pola Museum, Hakone)—or as Herbert points out, ‘Children’s Afternoon at Wargemont’ (1884, Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin). Regarding this painting he says:

“Those same three phrases could be used to praise Children’s Afternoon at Wargemont painted in 1884 shortly after the artist had mailed the ‘Société des Irrégularistes’ to Durand-Ruel. It conforms more obviously to the idea of decorative art because the furnishings of a bourgeois interior bring forth tight drawing and clear pattern. The highly colored Caucasian carpet on the table and the chintz draperies behind it are quite flat, echoing Japanese prints, so the picture has a folkloric or ‘primitive’ feeling, even a toylike aspect appropriate to the subject, including the visual pun of a doll held by a doll-like child.” (Ibid.)



Aline and her son Pierre, 1886, private collection



Children's Afternoon at Wargemont, 1884, Alte Nationalgalerie

Claude Keisch, Senior Curator at the Alte Nationalgalerie (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) where the Wargemont painting is held, recognizes in the Museum description of the piece that:

“The many different patterns, as on a Japanese woodcut, underline the unity of the picture surface.”  
(Museum Online Research at <https://recherche.smb.museum>)

Some of Renoir’s rough sketches may also suggest the possible influence of Japanese draftsmanship. Monneret, for instance, hints that this may be the case with his ‘Study of a Tree’ (1886, location unspecified) which “is reminiscent of Japanese stylization” (*Renoir*, 1990: 108). Castellani finds in his ‘Fisherman’ (c. 1867-69, Durand-Ruel Archives, Paris) that “The line delineates the forms with an elegance that reminds one of Japanese graphic art” (*Renoir: His Life and Works*, 1998: 15). While in some of Renoir’s underdrawings, faces have an aspect vaguely evoking the Far East in draftsmanship, such as those of the monochrome 1894 second edition of ‘Le Chapeau Épinglé’; as does a charcoal sketch ‘Head of a Woman’ (in Schneider, 1967: 69, date and location not given), probably in preparation for his ‘Girl with a Straw Hat’ (c. 1884, private collection); or his ‘Femme allaitant son enfant’ (date and location not given, originally Renoir Collection, in G. Rivière, 1921: 54), among other sketches, such as for his nude groups, a quality lost in the finished paintings.

Examples such as these should not mislead the reader into concluding they have heard about the sum of it. Fascinating parallels exist—compositional, thematic, and in the particular treatment of forms—between Renoir’s works and imagery from Japanese prints and picture books collected by his close associates such as Monet; and Renoir himself, according to Rewald, owned some as well (Rewald, 1973: 207), though any details, and their whereabouts, like the Japanese objects he repeatedly painted in his studio or outdoors, are shrouded in obscurity. Were Monet alone Renoir’s source, that would nevertheless constitute a substantial cache of images, even if Renoir only saw portion of Monet’s collection. At Monet’s house in Giverny are numerous prints he collected over the years, which still cover the walls there: 292 ukiyo-e sheets are extant, some part of triptychs, with a few catalogue-numbered prints missing (see Kobayashi Toshinobu, ‘Claude Monet’s Ukiyo-e Print Collection’, *Society for the Study of Japonisme Report No. 3*, 1983, pp. 11-29).

What first comes to mind is Renoir's bather series, reminiscent of popular public bath or abalone diving scenes in Japanese prints. These are motifs which in Degas are widely recognized as a result of Japanese influence. In the case of Renoir, there is at times an even greater correspondence of detail with ukiyo-e imagery, but because it is Renoir, it simply goes overlooked.

Yet the move in Impressionism towards the here and now, in poses that reflected the relaxed, everyday postures in mundane settings of Japanese prints (in contrast to classical models)—instrumental in the attainment of greater artistic and perceptual freedom—was something shared by all the major Impressionist artists. Renoir was no different, even if his resulting figures would have a 17th century fleshiness and an 18th century chromatic quality about them. Nicole R. Myers, Senior Curator of European Art at the Dallas Museum of Art, observes that his 'Before the Bath' (c. 1875, Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia), a mundane scene of feminine toiletry

"...would be Renoir's first and only foray into the depiction of this everyday indoor ritual, and his composition, featuring a woman naked from the waist up, broke with standard conventions for the motif that involved little to no nudity. Renoir's utterly novel take on this traditional theme, transferred from the Mediterranean harem to the Parisian bedroom, may have been inspired by Japanese woodblock prints of the Edo period, such as those by Utagawa Kunisada that depict women, frequently stripped to the waist, bathing and performing their toilettes in boudoirs. Though the influence of Japanese prints on the development of Impressionism, particularly in the works of Monet and Mary Cassatt, has been studied in great depth, Renoir is typically excluded from this line of inquiry." ('From Realism to Impressionism: Renoir's Early Nudes', in Bell and Shackelford, eds., 2019: 81)

Again, the prevailing acceptance of Vollard's anecdotes at face value has effectively blocked its path. Going beyond 'Before the Bath', Myers suggests a much wider range of Renoir's nudes need to be studied in relation to Japanese prints, pointing to:

"The similarities between his later outdoor bathers—chest exposed, draperies gathered at their hips, combing or fixing their hair against the backdrop of ocean or river—and those of Japanese ama divers (women who harvested pearls and shellfish) in the prints of Kunisada and Kitagawa Utamaro beg further investigation. Notably, the first owner of *Before the Bath*, Theodore Duret, was an early and important collector of Japanese art." (Bell and Shackelford, 2019: 81)

We might point to Monet's print of 'Abalone Divers' (ama) by Utagawa Kunisada, at his house in Giverny, for one. Originally a triptych, titled 'Mitsuui Amuses Himself by the Sea', Part 3 (Mitsuui isobe asobi sono san 光氏磯遊び 其三, 1859, image British Museum), of which Monet possessed the center sheet shown here below, and the left sheet also of abalone divers (not shown), but not the right side portraying Mitsuui (*Les Estampes Japonaises de Monet à Giverny*, Beaux Arts magazine, February 2000). Next to it we have placed Renoir's sketch, 'Two Bathers' from *L'Estampe Originale* (1895, Metropolitan Museum of Art), in which the two women, though in different poses from the Kunisada figures, nevertheless reflect a comparable, inverted composition, as if the Kunisada image was viewed from a mirror or flipped over and held up to a light.



Kunisada, Abalone Divers, 1859, ©The Trustees of the British Museum



Renoir, Two Bathers from *L'Estampe Originale*, 1895, MET



In Kunisada the female in the foreground is wringing her hair, while in Renoir's picture the girl is perhaps drying her foot, yet the two crouching figures with their bent knees and sprayed, angled feet seem to be counterparts, just as the two other figures sitting upright do; the other female abalone diver, placing her hands around her compressed knees, corresponds in Renoir's sketch to the girl with compressed knees placing her hands around her hat. The large waves of Kunisada in the immediate background also find their counterpart in Renoir's picture, though what they actually represent in the etching is not clear. Is it liquid or solid? Kunisada's waves, while we understand they must be waves from the lines and color, the tactile impression they give is of a smooth, immobile solid, a quality possibly transmitted to Renoir, where they seem better understood as simply a shape derived from the waves in Kunisada's image. In both cases those forms are contrasted with the flat surface of the sea extending infinitely beyond. More than any direct matching of draftsmanship, Renoir's two figures, in their relationship to each other and their surroundings, are highly analogous in emotive impact to Kunisada's figures and composition.

Given the long friendship between Monet and Renoir, it is not improbable that Renoir had the opportunity to come in contact with prints such as the one above. Prints of abalone and clam fishers/gatherers were popular and a topic of study among collectors at the time:

“The theme of awabi or shellfish divers is of great renown, appearing frequently in many collections. Monet himself possessed three such prints: two by Kunisada and one by Chikanobu. The sheet on the left [shown above] corresponds in part to the description Edmond de Goncourt provided of a similar work in his study of Utamaro.”  
(*Les Estampes Japonaises de Monet à Giverny*, text by Marie Rose Faure, 2000: 9)

Certainly there is a good degree of correspondence between certain ukiyo-e prints Monet collected, and several of Renoir's female portraits. Renoir shares thematic and compositional traits with ukiyo-e prints in genres such as maternity scenes, depictions of bathing or relaxing by open water, hair grooming, and female engagement in the arts.

The print by Isoda Koryusai 'Interior of a Bathhouse' (1770s, MFA Boston), a detail of which is shown below, whether or not part of the collections of Monet or other artists Renoir associated with, is representative of prints like it, then circulating in Europe. To the left is Renoir's 'Nude in an Armchair' (1890, private collection, image Wikimedia Commons), depicting a woman wiping her leg near her ankle with a cloth or towel, an item that often appears in his nudes. Renoir's figure and that by Koryusai next to it (left among the three) of a bather wiping her ankle with a 'tenugui' (a small towel omnipresent in Japanese baths), mirror each other in that distinctive pose of theirs, and provide an intriguing case for literal influences.



Renoir, *Nude in an Armchair*, 1890, private collection



Koryusai, *Detail of Interior of a Bathhouse*, 1770s, MFA Boston

Sylvie Patry, Deputy Director for Curatorial Affairs and Collections at the Musée d'Orsay, speaking of the late 19th century resurgence of interest in the decorative arts and arabesque design—to which Renoir was inclined and which affected his portrayal of bathing scenes involving multiple figures—points out the influence of Japanese ukiyo-e prints upon those depictions. Regarding 'Bathers Playing with a Crab' (1897, Cleveland Museum of Art), she observes:

“The theme and composition evoke Japanese prints, the source of all the great decorative revivals of the 19th century, and more specifically Harunobu's *Le Crabe plein d'espièglerie* [the mischievous crab], also dominated by a play of undulating lines.” (Musée d'Orsay, *Renoir au XXe siècle*, 2009: 56)



Suzuki Harunobu's 'The Mischievous Crab' (1765-1770), known in English as 'The Clinging Crab' (MET), depicts two women playing in/near shallow waters, one of whom has her kimono edge pinched by a crab, while the other looks on. Renoir's painting depicts nude bathers near open water, one teasing another by holding a crab close to her face. Here the effect (besides the engaging idea of a crab as a focal point for feminine playfulness, being a creature neither too harmless nor too instinctively abhorrent as a spider), is of the kind that arises from general impressions, of undulating and interacting lines which form rounded and fluid shapes. We could add, however, that hints of Renoir's specific bather postures and combinations of them can be found in Japanese bathing scenes, where women slip and fall either by accident, or have been knocked down in a bathhouse brawl. These may account for the humorous, flustered aspect of some of Renoir's poses, such as in the 'Bathers Playing with a Crab'.

An example of a Japanese bathhouse print with figures in various postures is the Toyohara Kunichika triptych, which might be translated as 'Competing Complexions Flowering like Irises in a Bath' (1868, 'Hadakurabe hana no shobuyu 肌競花の娼婦湯'). In the Monet collection, the French title is: 'Le bain qui donne à la peau le velouté des fleurs' (*Beaux Arts magazine*, Feb. 2000, p. 27). Another is Ochiai Yoshiiku's triptych, 'Competing Slender Hips like Snowy Willows in a Bath' (1868, 'Kurabekoshi yuki no yanagi' 競細腰雪柳風呂, again, my trans.). The two, in fact, can be lined up to make one magnificent mural-like scene of six panels, as at the Library of Congress, DC, where it has been given the combined title: 'Naked bodies compared to irises in hot water, comparing hips to a snow laden willow in hot water'. —Unfortunately, no English translation can do justice to the pithy, overlapping punning in Japanese, which combines ideographic and homonymic wit, where parts of speech merge, like links in a chain (of only six characters each)—to evoke floral, seasonal, anatomical, and social imagery simultaneously.

In any case, when so viewed together, it is surprising to discover they are the work of two separate artists, as the draftsmanship is indistinguishable and the scenes closely align. Published in the same year with a single publisher's seal for both (of Echizenya Kaju) on the left Kunichika triptych, one surmises they were probably produced in friendly competition between the two artists, and meant to be viewed as one.



Kunichika, Irises in Hot Water, 1868, LOC

Yoshiiku, Snow Laden Willow in Hot Water, 1868, LOC

For perspective, it should be noted the ukiyo-e masters throughout the Edo period tried their hand at this time-honored genre. In the 17th century, Hishikawa Moronobu; in the 18th century, Katsukawa Shunsho; in the first half of the 19th century, Utagawa Kuniyoshi; to name a few. Their figures conveyed *movements*, sometimes subtle, sometimes undignified, rather than 'poses', each attempting to capture varied fleeting moments of the mundane. Such scenes are also depicted on splendidly colored byobu (folding) screens of the early 17th century, during the Kan'ei era (1624-1644). Indeed, portrayals of outdoor bathing reach back to the 'Choju-giga', sometimes translated as 'Scrolls of Frolicking Animals'—that delightful picture scroll of anthropomorphized frogs and rabbits from the 12th century, quite the first of its kind in world history. For a concise survey of the history of the Japanese bathing genre, see Yoshida Eiji, 'Furoba no eshi' in *The Ukiyoe Quarterly* (No. 2, 1962, Ryoku-en Shobo).

Such scenes were produced in good numbers just around the time Impressionism was gestating, and as aforementioned, Monet owned some of the prints shown above. An encounter with ukiyo-e images of this genre was quite probable for anyone who moved in avant-garde circles. Whatever specific prints Renoir may or may not have observed, his 'After the Bath' (1888, private collection) of a woman in three quarter rear view, drying the left side of her torso with a cloth; 'Blond Braiding her Hair' (1886, Dallas Museum of Art) of a woman facing back, managing her long hair with both hands; 'Rising' (c.1909 Barnes Foundation) of a woman in an awkward moment of changing; his *Bathers in the Forest*, (c. 1897, Barnes Foundation); in particular his red crayon and white chalk sketches around 1886-87, such as 'The Bathing Spot' (c.1886-87, Thyssen-Bornemisza Collections, Madrid), and 'Study of Nudes' (c. 1886-87, Dallas Museum of Art); among various other depictions of nudes tending to themselves with cloth, deserve to be considered from this new angle.

Even his ‘The Great Bathers’, also known as ‘The Large Bathers’ (1884-1887, Philadelphia Museum of Art), with its iconic reclining nude in the left foreground, might be included in this group, interpreted until now in purely classical revivalist terms. The Renaissance and Baroque have no limit of contorted poses, but they gravitate to the extremes of ‘agony and ecstasy’ (to borrow Irving Stone’s expression), while the Rococo and Neo-classical are too polished or ethereal. Even François Girardon’s ‘Le Bain des nymphes’ with its elegant figures does not fully account for the awkwardness, the slightly jerky and unbalanced, ‘whoops’/‘uh-oh’ sensation of the figure with both feet off the ground and one hand in the air; while incorporating an element of ‘capture the disconcerting moment’ draftsmanship of a Kunichika, Yoshiiku, or Hokusai would.

The same could be said about the mundaneness of the act of toweling by the figure on the left, besides her. There is a sense of disjuncture between the figures themselves, and between the figures and their surroundings as well, as if from different sources joined together. This may be part of the reason Pissarro, for one, found the painting so unsettling (discussed by Bailey in Bell and Shackelford, 2019: 44). Often artists leave hints of their sources in their pictures, and Colin Bailey, in his introductory essay to the heralded 2019 exhibit focusing on Renoir’s nudes, ‘Renoir, the Body the Senses’, points out:

“The brunette at left, whose coiffure is held in place by ornaments of vaguely japonisant design, is shown seated on a white cloth edged in red, her linen petticoat strategically placed to cover her pubis. She protects herself with her right hand, as her braided companion is about to splash her with water. Slightly farther back on the bank, the third nude—whose apricot hair falls behind her shoulders—is portrayed drying her back with a sheet edged in blue. (The banal but intimate gesture of toweling still shocks in its informality.)”

(‘Renoir and the Nude: An Introduction’, in Bell and Shackelford, 2019: 44)

The banality of toweling can hardly be attributed to classical sources, but is found in ukiyo-e images, such as in the Kunichika print where a woman is toweling her back. In fact, in that same panel is a figure who has fallen with one arm raised and both feet off the ground one held higher and more bent the other, reminding us of Renoir’s reclining figure with her arm and feet likewise raised.



Kunichika, Detail of Irises in Hot Water, 1868, LOC



Renoir, The Great Bathers, 1884-1887, PMA

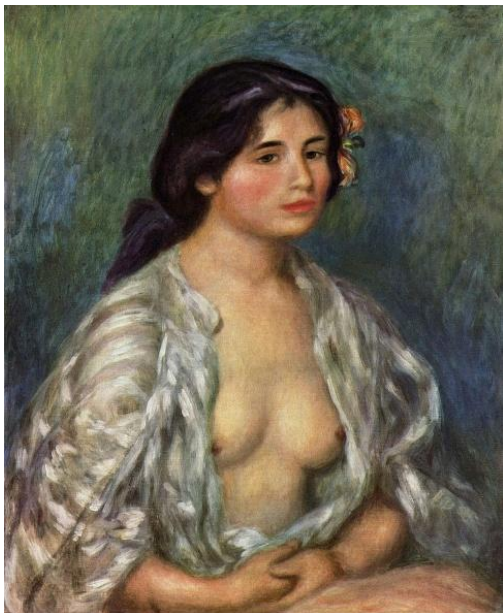
Furthermore, we find red and yellow ‘kanzashi’ hair ornaments in Kunichika’s bun-haired bather in the left foreground as in Renoir’s bun-haired nude, which are indistinct and smaller, like a secretive intimation or vague remembrance of a past observation. As in Renoir’s figure toweling her back, so too, Kunichika’s woman does so with a cloth lined in blue.

It is almost as if the Kunichika image has been rotated 180 degrees. If this indeed was what was done by Renoir, it would be a classic case of modified borrowing, or *inversion* (see ‘Japonisme Theory’ at japonisme.org). He clearly does it with his own sketches such as his ‘Le Chapeau Épinglé’ lithographs, where the 1894 version faces right (e.g. 1894, LACMA) and the 1898 version faces left (e.g. 1898, MET). The Kunichika image is from the missing panel of the same triptych in Monet’s collection mentioned earlier.



But these are more of the exception to Renoir's feminine portrayals, which on the whole may be said to emphasize the opposite quality of complete repose within their surroundings. In that aspect, bijinga portraiture, especially those by Utamaro, though perhaps not necessarily always with a point-to-point correspondence of detail to Renoir's images, indeed, despite the deceptively Rubenesque forms of Renoir, conveys a comparable sense of gentleness and feminine intimacy—an uninhibited ease with each other, and a down to earth serenity of the everyday.

That shared spirit, however, cannot be understood by an observer unless he or she knows both the range and detail of expressions in both Utamaro's and Renoir's women. Most of all is that particular, inexplicably soft 'Utamaro-esque' gaze, which has been unfairly judged by critics as 'dumb' or 'passive' in Renoir's female portraiture. Thus it seems, Renoir did not just adopt at times the markedly delineated aspects of ukiyo-e; rather he absorbed the ideal of femininity expressed in the art—and should anyone have the title, surely it is Renoir who deserves it: 'The Utamaro of the West'.



Renoir, Gabrielle with Open Blouse, c. 1907  
Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, Wikimedia Commons



Utamaro, Pipe (Kiseru), from *Fujin sogaku juttai*, 1802-1803  
Art Institute of Chicago

Renoir's 'Gabrielle with Open Blouse' (c. 1907, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art) makes an alluring pair with Utamaro's 'Pipe' (1802-1803, Art Institute of Chicago; also in the BnF Henri Rivière collection), from his series *Ten Types in the Physiognomic Study of Women* (*Fujin sogaku juttai* or *jittai*, 婦人相学拾帖). In both pieces a woman is depicted from the waist up, turning her head, resulting in a three-quarter profile, wearing an informal, loose silky garment pulled open in a likewise manner, baring her chest. Her long, luxuriant dark hair is thrown back and bundled. The correspondence of the edge of the garment in relation to the body's contours is striking. A sense of unpretentious wholesomeness permeates both. But what especially resonates is the difficult to describe mood, their expressions that share a very distinct temperamental quality.

While Gabrielle's blouse has kimono-like sleeves with the forearms exposed as does Utamaro's figure, the treatment of the hands, admittedly, is completely different. Renoir has done a perfunctory job of the hands in this case, while in Utamaro, the hands, while rendered purely in outline, are a masterful job of draftsmanship, and critical in conveying the persona of the subject.

As indicated from even the few examples taken from the collection of Henri Rivière (who, though much younger than Renoir, shared a common acquaintance with Hayashi Tadamasa and a strong link to Georges Rivière, Henri's relative and Renoir's good friend; the collecting of Japanese prints which H. Rivière commenced early in his life in the late 1880s overlaps with the period of Renoir's works here), the kinds of prints admired and owned by French artists in the late 19th century were quite different from the images that commonly circulate today as representative of Japanese prints, which convey only the most conventional of impressions. Except for a handful of extremely iconic images, the finer ukiyo-e works, unforgettably vivid and original, are rarely shown in art histories, whether in Western countries or even in Japan. In any case, Renoir had the opportunity to see a good number of Utamaro prints, given the bijinga artist's popularity in Parisian artistic circles; Monet alone owned 49 Utamaro prints, some of those forming triptychs (T. Kobayashi, 'Claude Monet's Ukiyo-e Print Collection', *Society for the Study of Japonisme Report No. 3*, 1983: 20).



In certain of Renoir's female portraits, a specific aspect of his draftsmanship recalls ukiyo-e, such as the hands of 'Woman with a Hat' (1891, National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo)—the palms are elongated and flattened, simplified without the care to anatomical or physical reality as found in the rest of the subject (Renoir's approach to depicting hands varies, but they usually show more fullness, or are realistically portrayed). Sometimes it is a certain angled pose, such as his 'Jeune femme au chapeau noir' (1880-85, Palais des Beaux-Arts de Lille) that evokes quintessentially bijinga style portraiture.

To the left of Renoir's *Jeune femme* is 'The Face of Oshun, Wife of Denbei' (c. 1800, MFA Boston). Once again, before speaking of any point to point correspondence of any kind, Renoir's works display a noticeable qualitative, emotive resonance with feminine ukiyo-e imagery. It is a conception of volumes, of the fine balance of delicate and bold pattern, the technique of creating focus or emphasis within the picture, the sense of spatial organization, of layout pushing the limits of the pictorial frame—which Renoir shares with the ukiyo-e artist Utamaro.



Utamaro, *The Face of Oshun, Wife of Denbei*, c. 1800, MFA Boston

Renoir, *Jeune femme au chapeau noir*, 1880-85, PBA Lille

This example leads us to consider Renoir's extensive series of hatted women, which seems to evoke Utamaro's portraits of hatted 'bijin' ('beauties'). Francesca Castellani finds Renoir's variations of 'Le Chapeau Épinglé' (or 'The Frilled Hat', 1897, 1898 e.g. MoMA, lithographs mentioned earlier), as having an essential quality akin to ukiyo-e, for, as

“in Japanese prints, these girls are immersed in a fluid and velvety atmosphere that transfigures their physical reality and the fortuitousness of this occasion.”

(Renoir: *His Life and Works*, 1996, English version 1998: 192)

If it was the case that Renoir did wish to emulate bijinga in his own French way, the hat would have been an excellent device, a substitute for the large raised traditional Japanese hairstyles—kamigata—which were truly varied in shape and ornamental additions such as 'kanzashi' (decorative pins) and 'kushi' (decorative combs) of every design. The closest effect to it in 19th century France would have been achieved by a pinned, decorated hat. This might be inferred in Renoir's 'Jeune femme au chapeau noir', where her black hat and its ornament take the place of the volume and strong sense of presence Utamaro gives Oshun by her large black bun and pins. Renoir's application of a light, watercolor-like 'shadow' above his subject's hat (top edge, center right) seems to assist in matching the weight of Oshun's magnificent bun.

The effect of the bold pattern of Oshun's clothing (which acts to counterbalance the 'visual weight' of Oshun's hair), is achieved by the black ornament at the throat of the *Jeune femme* contrasted to her white frilly collar; while the standing edge of Oshun's kimono, which reaches up covering the back of her neck (and thus helps to visually support the mass of hair and ameliorate a sense of over-extension), is echoed in Renoir by the addition of a few rough brush strokes of black at the back of the *Jeune femme*'s neck, which otherwise seems difficult to account for. At the same time, Oshun's cloth with which she wipes the sweat of her side brow, wraps around the lower part of the picture frame covering her bold patterned clothing, preventing the pattern from 'outshining' the subject, and further heightens our focus upon Oshun's face and hairdo. Renoir creates a comparable effect by the spilling of the backdrop color onto the shoulder of the *Jeune femme*.

Utamaro was, like Renoir, known for his many portraits of women in hats or elaborate headwear, though this was a popular genre across ukiyo-e artists. To provide some idea of that genre, a few examples follow from the Utamaro series *An Array of Dancing Girls of the Present Day* (*Tōsei odoriko zoroi*). The first is his ever so delicate 'Yoshiwara Suzume' (1793/94, Tokyo National Museum), and placed next to it is Renoir's 'Head of a Young Woman in a Yellow Hat' (1894, private collection, image Wikimedia Commons). Renoir uses an off-center cropping approach like Utamaro, but more

importantly, conveys a similar sense of particularly delicate, tender femininity. In Renoir's hatted woman, the slightly separated lips, as if habitually open, with their 'puffy' surrounding area, are also characteristic of Utamaro's female portraiture, of which a good number are done in this manner, the classic example being his 'Geisha of the Northern District' (i.e. of the New Yoshiwara, c. 1800), shown holding a red sake cup. The hand of Renoir's woman also evokes Utamaro, with its long palm relative to the fingers and expressive quality, as in 'Hanaogi of the Ogiya' from the series *Komei bijin rokkasen* (c. 1795/96)—the comparison here is telling. And in both the yellow hatted woman and the Yoshiwara-suzume, a layered three-dimensional complexity is created by the combination of contrasting shapes, textures, and lines around the head and neck—front, back, and above. Finally, Renoir's work displays what Schneider referred to as an emptiness or economical coloring of the background as in Japanese prints, though this is only mentioned as part of the analogous effect of creating a sense of immediacy, of bringing the subject closer to the viewer.



Renoir, Head of a Young Woman in a Yellow Hat, 1894, private collection



Utamaro, Yoshiwara-suzume, 1793–1794, TNM

Below, Utamaro's 'The Heron Maiden' (Sagi-musume, 1793/94, Tokyo National Museum), also from the same series, has been placed besides Renoir's pastel, 'Woman in a Flowered Hat' (1916-1918). The whereabouts of this pastel are unknown according to Elizabeth Elias Kaufman, in her *Renoir* (Minster Books, 1980); it was featured earlier in Jacques Chambaudet's *Renoir: Vision et Technique* (Éditions Pétridès, 1947), a limited edition of lithographs, and there the image is lighter and perhaps closer to Utamaro.



Renoir, Woman in a Flowered Hat, 1916-18, whereabouts unknown



Utamaro, The Heron Maiden (Sagi-musume), 1793–94, TNM

Once again, their example suggests further investigation between Renoir and Utamaro (and other ukiyo-e artists) is merited. The cropped, close-up composition, the viewing angle, the relation of the hat to face, all this of course is immediately noticeable, but also of interest is the rendering of the tightly covered neck and facial disposition, including details such as the 'pointy' ear of Renoir's woman, which seems to reflect the pointed shape of the Heron Maiden's ear, or the slightly puckered lips. Regardless of whether any single detail might be coincidental, the overall draftsmanship is not typical of Renoir with its unusually thick black outlines, and suggests Japanese woodblock print influence. The convergence of small detail with ukiyo-e imagery does not necessarily mean that this specific work was the source—though that is surely possible—but rather that such details, of which endless variations exist in countless other ukiyo-e, have been picked up by Renoir's eye and brush over time. The corresponding olive color, common in Utamaro's prints, is applied differently, as often seems to be the case when a Japanese aspect is to be suspected in Renoir, and is a phenomenon that can be seen in other artists where japonisme is at work.



Moving beyond portraiture, Renoir's paintings done with Monet at La Grenouillère hint at possible thematic and compositional associations with the boat-outing genre of ukiyo-e, where boats are boarded by crowds of mainly stylish women. Renoir's 'La Grenouillère' (1869, Nationalmuseum Stockholm) and Monet's 'La Grenouillère' (1869, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC), painted together in high spirits of camaraderie, despite the differences of brushwork, color palette, and subject matter focus, share much in common with ukiyo-e compositional techniques of frame cut sterns/prows converging and generally pronounced cropping, not to mention the thematic similarity in capturing the atmosphere of fashionable crowds.

A representative example of a ukiyo-e boating scene by Kunisada II (1823-1880) is shown below, his pentptych, 'New Yoshiwara in Temporary Quarters: Owariya Hikotaro Courtesans Viewing Cherry Blossoms' (新よし原仮託おはりや彦太郎抱遊女花の図, 1863, Tokyo Metropolitan Library, my trans.). Whether Monet or Renoir had seen this print is unknown, but what is certain is that Monet owned prints of this genre, including three by Chobunsai Eishi (1756-1829), a contemporary of Utamaro's, as documented in Kobayashi's inventory list with the original Japanese titles (*Society for the Study of Japonisme Report No. 3*, 1983: 11-29). Most of the major ukiyo-e artists of the early to mid-19th century produced prints of this kind, depicting crowds of boats outing on spring days or summer evenings. At the very least, there is no denying that Renoir's circle of artist friends were familiar with the Japanese boating genre, for their Impressionist portraits are scattered with uchiwa fans depicting scenes with cropped boats, as in Monet's 'La Japonaise' (1876, MFA Boston), and Manet's 'The Lady with Fans' (1873, Musée d'Orsay).

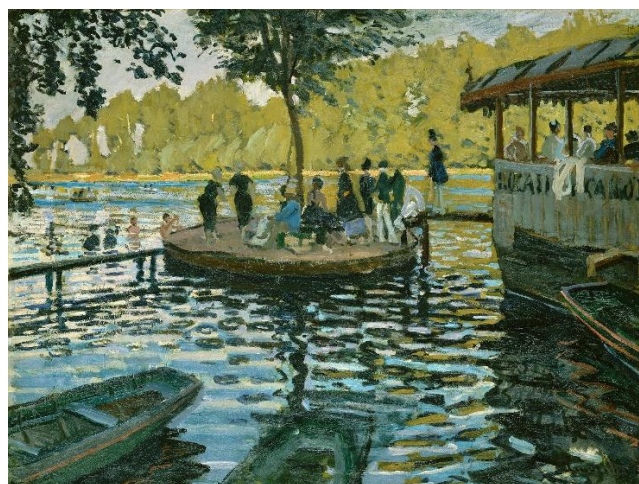


Kunisada II, New Yoshiwara in Temporary Quarters: Owariya Hikotaro Courtesans Viewing Cherry Blossoms, 1863, Tokyo Metropolitan Library

Large roofed pleasure barges with drapes overhanging on the sides, as in this Kunisada II picture (and as seen below, cropped on the right edge in both paintings), in combination with smaller boats, were common in such ukiyo-e compositions, and one wonders if Monet and Renoir chose La Grenouillère in part because it provided a similar package of elements found in Japanese prints. The hanging branches/vines in Renoir's version are certainly reminiscent of Hiroshige's 'Wistaria at Kameido Tenjin Shrine' (1856), from his series *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*, with its view of the water through low-hanging wisteria. Considering also the greater attention he paid to the fashionableness of the socializing ladies in his picture, Renoir's 'La Grenouillère'—perhaps to the surprise of some—may be deemed more Japanese in spirit and form than Monet's.



Renoir, La Grenouillère, 1869, Nationalmuseum Stockholm



Monet, La Grenouillère, 1869, Metropolitan Museum of Art



Another of Renoir's La Grenouillère paintings is 'Bathing on the Seine' (1869, Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts). Vertically traversed by a large tree trunk from top to bottom, it reveals a classic and well-recognized ukiyo-e technique often employed by the likes of Hiroshige and Hokusai. An example from Hokusai, 'Mishima Pass in Kai Province' (Koshu Mishima-goe), from the series *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* (c. 1830/33, Art Institute of Chicago), has been placed side by side with Renoir's painting for ease of comparison. This series was extremely popular and well-known at the time to French impressionist artists in general, Monet having at least six of the series at Giverny, as counted in the aforementioned report of Kobayashi. The Pushkin Museum image of Renoir's painting has been used to ensure chromatic veracity ([https://pushkinmuseum.art/data/fonds/europe\\_and\\_america/j/2001\\_3000/zh\\_3407/index.php?lang=en](https://pushkinmuseum.art/data/fonds/europe_and_america/j/2001_3000/zh_3407/index.php?lang=en), 448 x 327 pixels, reduced beyond requirements). Note not only how composition, but even in overall coloring and tone shifts, Renoir may have absorbed something of Hokusai, which, depending on the specific print, come sometimes in deeper hues.



Renoir, Bathing at the Seine/La Grenouillere, 1869, Pushkin



Hokusai, Mishima Pass in Kai Province, c. 1830/33, Art Institute of Chicago

Jacques Dufwa, in his *Winds from the East: A Study in the Art of Manet, Degas, Monet, and Whistler 1856-86* (Stockholm Studies in the History of Art 34, 1981) speaking of Monet's version, but also including a discussion of Renoir, sees a marked shift, in a fundamental sense, of engaging in a true 'at the moment' conveyance of perceptual sensations, and a freer use of color, light, and contrast at La Grenouillère—inspired by Japanese artistic imagery:

“...Monet, precisely in his Impressionism, was to express something quite genuinely Japanese, and some of the works analysed here have already given us an idea of this. ... Here, both of the painters allowed themselves to be completely absorbed by the impressions of the moment upon their senses. ...

Like the Japanese, Monet avoided giving volume by shading; the brush strokes are broad, the contrasts in colour striking. As in Japanese prints, there is a display of exciting and colourful detail against subdued colours and black—light against darkness, both in the depiction of the figures and in the water's reflection of sun and shadow. In the water, light and colour make a glittering dance: movement and transformation in contrast to mass and volume.” (1981: 135-136)

But if this is true for Monet, it must be to a good extent for Renoir as well, at least in this particular case. Given the commonly understood divergence in brushwork and focus, and despite the differences that must exist between two unique artistic personalities, Renoir shares with Monet in these paintings at La Grenouillère many of the points raised above. There they were, painting for perhaps two months, at times side by side outdoors, and it would hardly seem reasonable to say that the spirit of Monet, reaching for a more free and spontaneous expression, sparked in no small part by the example of Japan, did not overflow and affect Renoir with an awareness of those sources. Japanese art, as a fundamental force in shaping the goals and practice of Impressionism for Monet, must be said to have had an effect on Renoir's plein-air and chromatic sensibilities, even if primarily in a form of indirect transmission.

Certainly a variety of intriguing parallels with classic ukiyo-e imagery can be found in Renoir's composition of several other outdoor scenes, despite at times his pronounced use of shadow, sunlight, and reflection, which convey a very different first impression from that of woodblock prints. His 'Mussel-fishers at Berneval' (1879, Barnes Foundation), for instance, with its woman with a woven basket on her back overlooking her shoulder at children, is reminiscent of ukiyo-e images of common folk women and children at the shore, such as the 'shiohi-gari' or 'receded tide clam-gathering' genre of ukiyo-e, which a good number of artists from Hokusai to Chikanobu tried their hand at.

An illuminating example is one of Renoir's most admired pictures, 'Luncheon of the Boating Party' (1880-81, Phillips Collection, DC), which follows. The idea of Japanese influence in the masterpiece might provoke shrill voices of protest, but reserving judgement for later, let us compare this work with Kubo Shunman's diptych 'Party in Shikian restaurant on Nakazu [Nakasu] island overlooking Sumida River' (1787-1788, British Museum), shown below it.



Renoir, Luncheon of the Boating Party, 1880-81, Phillips Collection



Shunman, Party in Shikian restaurant, 1787-88, © Trustees of the British Museum

At first glance, the difference of media—oil paint vs. woodblock print, the obviously contrasting draftsmanship, and of course the cultural settings, are so at odds with each other that they might not strike one as connected in any way. But stepping back, with one's cultural lenses removed, note in both the general compositional parallels—the combination of figures, still-life, and landscape in one work; and from there move to a closer examination of the organizational details of both pictures.

Starting with the obvious correspondences of, for instance, one man standing leaning against the railing to the left, somewhat aloof; with a woman along the same railing plane, leaning forward (though in the opposite direction); and the other younger fellow to the right sitting with the women—this one description serves both. The manner in which the standing and sitting figures are contrasted, how their facing in different directions is amplified, broken up, separated in groups of two or three—these too are of interest. The angle from which both are painted is also similar, back from the left corner of the balcony, only that Renoir is closer, while Shunman has depicted it from beyond the railing, against which Renoir would have had his back. Of course details cannot possibly be the same. The subject matter of the still lifes is naturally different—in Renoir, the wine bottles make a central mass, while in Shunman it is a large red ‘tai’ fish on a plate, but nevertheless situated center left in the picture frame at similar angles.

In both, the railing divides the two halves of the image, one filled with characters, the other with the landscape beyond. Recognizable are the parallels of compositional technique, such as the use of the striped awning vs. the boarded awning, both cutting across obliquely along the top. The jagged red edge of the awning corresponding to the line of red ‘chochin’ (foldable hanging lanterns) highlights the physical presence of the characters near them, fluttering or bobbing close to their heads. In both, the perspective device of boats, tiny to the extreme, in the distance, convey a sense of a broad expanse beyond, with the opposite bank to add, though barely visible in Renoir. The awning/chochin in combination with the railings accentuates the divide between the social gathering and landscape. Branches approach the dining area, in Shunman one tree actually rises up within the railing; in Renoir’s painting the trees seem to surround the characters in closer proximity and density perhaps than may have actually been the case from Renoir’s angle at La Fournaise in those days, at least as it appears in old lithographs such as the one shown in Susan Vreeland’s novel (*Luncheon of the Boating Party*, 2007); though this is not a critical issue. And it is a skillful transposition, if a conscious one, of Shunman’s prominent use of yellow clearly outlined or contrasted in places with black, which finds its counterpart in Renoir’s similarly toned straw hats, highlighted by the dark lines of their hatbands or rims.

Then there are correspondences which surely must be coincidence—but best to mention them for the record, and let the reader decide for himself. It is something that reminds us of all the slight variations of poses found in previous examples that have made sense pointing out only in the greater context of more important parallels. It is something, were it the only similarity, that could be dismissed; but instead, perhaps takes on a curiously intriguing significance—a hint as to how images, once observed, work their way, either consciously or unconsciously, into artistic representation in some unexpected form. That being said, and the following not an assertion that can be argued to any ascertainable conclusion, here it is:

Note in Shunman’s Shikian restaurant, the fellow sitting down on the floor to the right. Look closely and you will notice his hands raised, in a most unusual pose, as if imitating a dog with its paws raised. This is a very particular pose for a human being, and any artist who observed this picture could not fail to be curious about it; it would certainly be one detail that would stick in his or her imagination. And we find in Renoir an echo of it, transformed of course, just as we have seen him do repeatedly with Japanese motifs and poses—yes—perhaps you have guessed it, it is there in the dog held by the woman on the left (Aline), with his paws forward towards the woman. It shall be left at that.

But the artistic connection between the two pictures is more than a mirroring of positionings, poses, or colors—there is an agreement of attitudes between the different pairs of figures despite being reformulated by Renoir, and that mood of comfort without concern for social niceties which arrives only after a certain passage of time with the right small group chemistry, that pervades both pictures. The often raised link to Paolo Veronese’s ‘The Wedding at Cana’ (1563, Louvre), as a possible source, is rather stretched and forced, in comparison. Renoir’s is no Christ as Renaissance prince presiding over a grandiose banquet as if on a theater stage, done from a perfectly frontal, symmetrical one point perspective. And bringing in Jean-Antoine Watteau’s elysian and dreamy ‘Embarkation for Cythera’ (1717, Louvre), as a source, beyond inspiration for his art in general, is best characterized by the idiom ‘grasping at straws’ or perhaps ‘anything goes’.

Renoir’s painting captures not only the intimate dynamic between the characters, but contemporary bohemian and bourgeois society, and the atmosphere of France’s buoyant and epicurean world of leisure and pleasure around 1880, just as Shunman has portrayed Japan’s in the 1780s. Both are, in that sense, of exactly the same genre of art, best expressed by the single word: ‘ukiyo’—which literally means ‘floating world’; pictures of it being ‘ukiyo-e’ (‘e’ meaning picture). Renoir’s painting is nothing less than a masterstroke of ‘French-style ukiyo-e’. Meanwhile, the party on the nakasu (large sandbar) in the Sumida River, the ‘Seine of Edo’, where the Shikian restaurant was located, away from the crowd, was reached by boat, and thus trips to the island combined as a river outing. Shunman’s print, therefore, actually is the quintessential “luncheon of a boating party”. Slowly one realizes Renoir’s image is a reflection of that from the other side of the world—as if they were two parallel events—only that the cultural parameters have been changed. Add a table to the scene at the Shikian in Japan, or take away the table at the Fournaise in France—and truly, these two images become in essence one.



In another of Renoir's celebrated works, 'The Umbrellas' (c. 1881-1886, National Gallery, London), we find that here too, the structural and framing techniques are very much those of ukiyo-e artists. A print by Utamaro is provided for comparison, from his *Ehon shiki no hana* (1801, *Picture Book on Flowers of the Four Seasons*, MET, Object no.: 2013.854)—widely collected in Europe and America, and still found in major museums on both continents. Utamaro's picture of a tightly packed crowd with angled parasols, with pronounced cropping, is but one enlightening example of how clear precedents exist in Japanese art for many of Renoir's compositions.



Renoir, *The Umbrellas*, 1881-1886, National Gallery



Utamaro, *Picture Book on Flowers of the Four Seasons*, 1801, MET

Even Renoir's principal female figure on the left, painted later than the impressionistic right side, in what is considered a shift to a more realistic style of representation, also echoes bijinga postures of the parasol/rain or snow genre, in the peculiarities of her pose and tilted head in combination with that slight manner of holding up her skirt. Utagawa Kunimaru (1793-1829)'s print 'Woman with Umbrella and Dog in Snow' (1815-1821, MFA Boston) is one example; Utamaro's 'Orie, épouse de Jûtarô, contrainte de se prostituer' (1806, Musée Guimet, Paris, 綾津理模様竹の一節 忠臣講釈辻君之段 重太郎女房お里ゑ, image of original not available for reproduction), translated variously into English as 'Orie, wife of Jutarô forced into prostitution' or 'Beauty in the Rain', depicts a woman whose posture, though more pronounced, is typical of ukiyo-e, that might be raised as an additional ingredient to classical models in Renoir's draftsmanship.

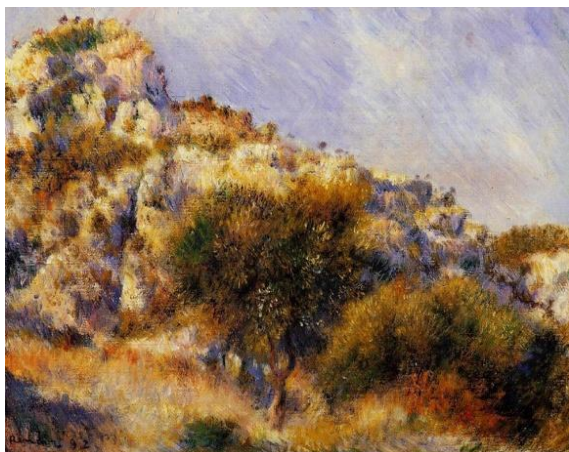
Sophie Monneret was one of the few who did mention the possibility of a Japanese aspect to 'The Umbrellas', though in the vaguest terms, stating: "Some have seen a reference to an engraving by Manet here, as well as the influence of Japanese art." (*Renoir*, 1990: 98) Much more deserves to be said, and furthermore, that certain engraving by Manet may very well have been inspired by similar Japanese images. —For, as anyone who has spent time with European collections of Japanese art soon comes to realize, what is often identified as a primary, local influence is merely the most conspicuous of a long line of equally convincing older sources—resting, perhaps, in a nearby ukiyo-e collector's library.

These reflections of ukiyo-e imagery in Renoir's oeuvre are not limited to social settings or the human form. The same can be said of his landscapes. His 'Wash-house at Bas-Meudon' (c. 1875, Clark Art Institute), 'Cliffs at Berneval' or otherwise 'at Pourville' (1879, private collection), and 'Rocks at L'Estaque' (1882, private collection) are examples among others of compositions strongly reminiscent of Hiroshige and Hokusai landscape conceptions, something which applies to Cézanne as well, whom Renoir met when painting at L'Estaque—though that connection, between Cézanne and ukiyo-e landscapes, has also been generally overlooked. For those interested, for starters, the following are recommended: Tohoku University Professor Emeritus Tanaka Hidemichi's 'Cézanne and "Japonisme"' in *Artibus et Historiae* (Vol. 22, No. 44, 2001); Japan's National Museum of Western Art produced *Hokusai and Japonisme* exhibition catalogue entries 218 to 220; as well as Klaus Berger's classic *Japonisme in Western Painting from Whistler to Matisse*, part of the Cambridge Studies in the History of Art (1980, English trans. 1992, 'Cézanne' pp. 112-119). According to Georges Rivière, in his *Renoir et ses amis* (H. Floury, 1921), who knew them personally, Cézanne came first in regards to japonisme: "Parmi les peintres impressionnistes, il y en eut aussi qui tirèrent parti de l'esthétique et de la technique de **l'art japonais**. Ce fut le cas de **Cézanne**, de Degas, et de Monet." (p. 58, bold added)

Which leads us to ask: Did Cézanne share with Renoir an awareness of Japanese-style landscapes while they painted in L'Estaque? Could they have chosen the location because it evoked those landscape forms—just as was possible for van Gogh to go south in search of a place closer in light to his prized Japanese prints, and probable for Cézanne that Hokusai's

multiple depictions from multiple vantage points of Mount Fuji aided him to do the same with Mont Sainte-Victoire, using similar compositional devices as Hokusai?

Next to Renoir's 'Rocks at L'Estaque' is Utagawa Hiroshige's 'Autumn Full Moon at Ishiyama' (Ishiyama shugetsu), from the series *Eight Views of Omi Province* (1834-1835, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Object no. JP2847). The parallels go beyond general composition and massing techniques; they reach to specific rock shape and crevice, interspersing of vegetation, the positioning of areas of open space.



Renoir, Rocks at L'Estaque, 1882, private collection



Hiroshige, Autumn Full Moon at Ishiyama, 1834-35, MET

Perhaps these examples are at least sufficient for the reader to realize the need to discuss Renoir's works in the wider context of Japanese precedents, given the enthusiastic reception of Japanese art at the time. Not to do so, as in the case of 'The Umbrellas', for instance, in reference to the ukiyo-e parasol and rain genres, might be judged scholarly negligence or at best blissful ignorance—that would never be allowed to pass were the tables turned, that is if we were discussing a Japanese painting with conspicuous European precedents. The charge of a widespread 'Marginalization of Japonisme in Western Art History' (Greg M. Thomas, in *Japan and Japonisme*, 2025: 83-102) seems not unfounded.

### Part III

Maurice Sérullaz, mentioned earlier—who we should stress was unquestionably one of the leading authorities on 19th century French art in France, and first curator of the Musée National Eugène-Delacroix, later Chief Curator of the Louvre Department of Prints and Drawings (as well as professor at the École du Louvre, author of the *Phaidon Encyclopedia of Impressionism*)—included Renoir among the seven artists strongly influenced by Japanese art, whom he specifies by name in his *The Concise Encyclopedia of Impressionism*:

"Finally there was one last and very marked influence on the young painters of the time, and that was Japan and everything Japanese. ... French artists got to know Japanese prints, and the great Japanese engravers such as Utamaro (1755-1806), Hokusai (1760-1849) and Hiroshige (1797-1858). To Western eyes, the general appearance of these prints with oblique off-centre effects, simplified forms and presentation, as well as their delicate colouring, were unusual and fascinating, and many artists, among them Manet, Monet, **Renoir**, van Gogh, Toulouse-Lautrec, Gauguin and especially Degas, as well as the Symbolists and the 'Nabis', were influenced by Japanese art." (Sérullaz, trans. ed. 1974: 12, bold added)

Not to be overlooked is Sérullaz's comment that such influence emanated from "everything Japanese". For while he brings up ukiyo-e artists, there is a reason for his added emphasis on Japan's impact as a cultural entity in all its manifestations, and Renoir is a good instance of that. As documented in Herbert's study of Renoir's personal writings, the artist absorbed the lessons of multiple Japanese artistic media from ceramics to sculpture to ukiyo-e, and it was the 'everything' that was more important to Renoir, in contrast to the well-known focus upon woodblock prints of a Monet, Degas, or Manet. The impact of Japanese kōgei in all its varied forms upon French arts and crafts was truly wide-reaching, and cannot possibly be discussed here meaningfully; one might start with the Society for the Study of Japonisme organized 5th Hatakeyama Symposium papers for 'Kōgei and Japonisme—re-examining 'modern' in industrial and artistic applications' (*Studies in Japonisme* 35, 2015).

It is not simply that a wider range of Japanese arts and crafts and their outward forms and colors were assimilated into Renoir's work. Oshima Seiji, in his chapter on Renoir (*Japonisme*, 1992: 195-198) argues that it is at a fundamental level of conceptualizing Art and Nature, the Self and the Other, that Renoir, more keen on philosophical issues than he is usually credited for, in his ideas mirrors much of what was defined as 'Japanese', as well as how it contrasted with Western/French civilization, as put forth by French authors such as the art critic Ernest Chesneau (1833-1890). Oshima finds strong parallels between Renoir's beliefs and those pertaining to Japan in documents such as Chesneau's speech for a federation of applied industrial arts, but also earlier in his views on Japanese art at the Paris World Exposition of 1867, and in his later tract, *Le Japon à Paris* (1878). Here too, the emphasis was not on ukiyo-e vs. Western painting, but rather a polemic for European arts as a whole based on the instructional example of that Eastern culture.

Idealized or stereotyped as it may have been, 'Japan' was nevertheless the revelation of a truer sense of balance beyond what symmetry offered, through asymmetry and irregularity; the attainment of a more intrinsic congruence of form and purpose, form and materials; exemplifying colors grounded in the native geography and climate; demonstrating a sense of oneness and directness of perception and action regarding nature, art, and reality—in short, ideas contained in the core concept of 'Wa'—that is, Harmony.

In fact there are parallels between Renoir's beliefs and the ideas of a variety of Japan enthusiasts of the age, such as Philippe Burty, who coined the term 'Japonisme', whose correspondence with Renoir we touched upon briefly, and a better friend of Renoir's than is generally appreciated. Or from the Arts and Crafts Movement in Britain: the artist Edward Burne-Jones, who, though depicting medieval scenes, was much inspired by the example of Japan; and William Morris, while not openly an admirer of Japanese art, reveals much in common with its ceramic motifs in his pottery and katagami stencil patterns in his fabric designs, as demonstrated in the meticulously arranged exhibition catalogue, *Katagami Style* (Mitsubishi Ichigokan Museum, et al., 2012). Herbert, in his thorough examination of Renoir's writings, found the following theme underlying much of it, beliefs shared in good part, with the aforementioned:

"Medieval Europe and other societies vaguely called "barbarian" had a wholeness, Renoir thought, that could not be found in his own day in France. For a contemporary society that could be admired, he named only Japan. Like his client and friendly critic Theodore Duret, and like van Gogh, he believed that Japanese craftsmen, matching those of earlier Europe, were integrated into their society. They were not tainted by modern cities, and instead enjoyed "this simple existence that allows them time to go out, to contemplate." In France the simple life that Renoir envisioned for Japanese artists had been destroyed, he believed, by the secular materialism of the nineteenth century." (*Nature's Workshop*, 2000: 15)

These overarching notions were close to his heart—ideas of French vs. Japanese culture, past vs. present, nature vs. art—where every Japanese art and craft provided insights into methodology, perception, and thought processes. These were not specific forms to imitate, he asserted, though, as we have come across repeatedly, he may have borrowed directly from those sources as well. But even so, most importantly, it is at the level of his underlying premises and defining conceptions where a connection between Renoir and Japan existed, shaping his outlook on art, nature, and his own sense of cultural identity.

Let us look at those conceptual links in greater depth. Throughout the section 'From Auguste Renoir's Notebook' in *Renoir, My Father* by his son Jean, are ideas that are most often associated with the basic precepts of japonisme—such as asymmetry, which Renoir calls irregularity, and which is perhaps a more apt description of Japanese art, since it was not really asymmetry as opposed to symmetry that was to be found in Japanese images but the more vivid conveyance of the irregularities of nature and spatial reality. A leaf that was part eaten by insects or part shriveled and part fresh, sprouting in unpredictable directions—this was more than just the difference between symmetry and asymmetry. Or women heavy or thin who are squatting or cutting their nails in the most awkward positions in compositions that center or 'de-center' the subject—either is fine, and asymmetry itself is not necessarily categorically superior even in Japanese art. Renoir understood and assimilated this, writing in his notebook:

"Everything that I call grammar or primary notions of Art can be summed up in one word: Irregularity. ... Take the leaf of a tree: take a hundred thousand other leaves of the same kind of tree: not one will exactly resemble another. ... Explain the irregularity in regularity. The value of regularity is in the eye only ... the non-value to the regularity of the compass." (J. Renoir, *Renoir, My Father*, English edition, Little, Brown, 1962: 240-241)

Renoir spoke and wrote of this idea many times, and it often concluded with the example of Japan, as he does in his manuscript on the principles of art, *Grammar*:

"When you go for a walk in the country you see that the trees, even though planted together, don't have the same shape or the same thickness. Pull all the leaves off a tree and lay them on top of one another, you'll see that, were



there millions of them, you wouldn't find a single one with exactly the same shape or the same color. You enjoy this [painted] avenue: but change it, add some regularized trees, with leaves modeled after one another, you'll sense the wearisomeness of the monotony and you'll quickly take refuge in the arms of nature. You'll be content with the infinite riches she gives you, without wanting to correct her. *That's why Japanese cups are pretty and ours ugly.*" (paragraph 69, in Herbert, *Nature's Workshop*, 2000: 136, *italics added*)



Renoir, Lily and Greenhouse Plants, 1864  
Museum Oskar Reinhart Am Römerholz, Winterthur  
(exposure increased for visibility)



Utamaro, Picture Book of Selected Insects (Ehon mushi erami), 1788  
Watson Library Digital Collections, MET

And perhaps the countless ukiyo-e bijin ('beauties'), which conveyed an image so contrary to the Greek ideal in almost every respect of physical and cultural composition—whether physiognomy and expression, pose or gesture, clothing and color—made it all very clear to Renoir: "It is customary to prostrate oneself in front of the (obvious) beauty of Greek art. The rest has no value. What a farce! It is as if you told me that a blonde is more beautiful than a brunette; and vice versa." (J. Renoir, *Renoir, My Father*, 1962: 241) Japanese art gave him a wider, more varied aesthetic landscape to regard, exposing the relative nature of cultural ideals, quietly seeping into his formulation of beauty—as we have repeatedly witnessed. Might it not be Renoir then, who better grasped the lessons of that Eastern tradition, more so than many of his contemporary well-known Japonistes?

Elsewhere he is more explicit about Japan. In his notebook, as recorded by his son Jean, he declares that "Young people should learn to see things for themselves, and not ask for advice", and that they should instead:

"Look at the way the Japanese painted birds and fish. Their system is quite simple. They sat down in the countryside and watched birds flying. By watching them carefully, they finally came to understand movement; and they did the same as regards fish." (J. Renoir, 1962: 243)

So what is the footing and foundation of an artist? "An artist, under pain of oblivion, must have confidence in himself, and listen only to his real master: Nature." An artist's "tools" are not important. It is observation of Nature 'as is', which counts, as he explains by the following:

"The Japanese still have a simplicity of life which gives them time to go about and to contemplate. They still look, fascinated, at a blade of grass, or the flight of birds, or the wonderful movements of fish, and they go home, their minds filled with beautiful ideas, which they have no trouble in putting on the objects they decorate." (Ibid.)

The existence of the decorative arts, including ceramics, loomed large in his imagination, and the lessons of Japan were never far from those conceptions. Renoir wrote:

"Everyone has written about ceramics, architecture, art in general. It has been stated that such and such a thing was beautiful, that this other thing was less so, but no one I think has given the real reason that makes for beauty

or ugliness. We're going to try to identify this thing together. Let's consider a few Japanese cups with the same design and some French cups with the same design as well. The Japanese cups will be beautiful and ours inferior, and I say that without even seeing them. (I'm speaking naturally about modern ones.) It's because Japanese cups are made with hand and eye and perceptiveness whereas French ones are made merely by a clever worker who has nothing except his skill, more harmful than useful in this case." (paragraph 25, *Grammar*, in Herbert, 2000: 127)

Renoir proceeds to explain in much detail:

"Let's consider how the Japanese artist must proceed at first. He wants to make a simple sowing of flowerets. He has seen these flowers, saturated himself with them, seen them according to his temperament and wants to render them as such. He prepares his palette and sketches lightly, without using a compass certainly, and scatters these flowers on this cup, arranges them to his taste and pleased with the effect produced, gets ready to make a second one. But whether the flowers as conceived were too small or crowded too closely together, he feels obliged to add one or two more. The third, and so on. It happens occasionally that an open space a bit too big in his initial plan forces him to add a little leaf or a twig that isn't found on the other cups. Such work activates the mind and, after a few years of work, you see yourself what this man can produce. Because you know that he never agrees to redoing identically the same things." (paragraph 26, *Grammar*, in Herbert 2000: 127)

Japan was unique in that sense; Renoir was not talking about the 'Orient' or 'Asia', nor even China, but specifically Japan. His is not to be confused with an 'Orientalism' or 'Chinoiserie'. For Renoir, during the peak of his powers, Japan, it seems, stood even above that ultimate training ground for all serious European artists until the end of the 19th century—Italy. For instance, while some art historians have assumed Renoir became acquainted with the medieval painter Cennino Cennini's treatise on art, *Il Libro dell'Arte*, from the early 1880s—this again based on Vollard, whose dates for Renoir's supposed acquisition of the book seem unlikely (Herbert, 2000: 42, footnote)—for which he was to write a preface in 1910, Herbert documents that, "his [Renoir's] manuscripts of 1882-84 do not have the slightest hint of Cennini and it was Japan, not Italy, that he compared with France." (2000: 42) Renoir describes this artistic exceptionalism in the following passage in his *Grammar*:

"The Japanese for the time being, or up until now, are the only people to have remained within the sound tradition provided by nature. I don't know this artistic people well enough to tell you the true reason for this. What's certain is that they're the only people to take the time to find pleasure from their eyes. They still have the simplicity of the great races. They go and see how birds fly, how fish swim, and have even captured the foam that the sea makes atop its waves, in order to fix them in bronze, on porcelain, and add them even to their unmatched embroidery." (paragraph 156, *Grammar*, in Herbert, 2000: 152)

It should be apparent from even these limited examples how much Renoir looked to Japan as embodying artistic ideals and the artist's proper approach to art. And furthermore, for Renoir, that Japanese decorative art sensibilities, which we have called 'kogeï aesthetics'—where distinctions between arts and crafts are transcended, where the decorative and poetic become one—were an enduring source of inspiration. We postulated two streams of influence there, one represented by the aesthetic qualities of crafts such as ceramics and textiles, and the other by fans and parasols; these united to form one tributary, which in turn united with that of more purely graphic arts such as ukiyo-e and ehon (picture books). Parallel to this tangible stimulus, was the equally wide, intangible flow of ideas discussed above, covering art, nature, reality, identity, and artistic perception (which, if expressed in one word, is 'Wa', harmony of the richest kind)—all this would have coalesced into a forceful imaginative undercurrent shaping Renoir's creations. If so, it may be said that Renoir was indeed very much immersed in japonisme, in the sense Philippe Burty defined it:

"as the study of the art and genius of Japan."

Finally, it should be made clear that the present study does not argue Japan was Renoir's sole source—his art clearly draws upon multiple traditions, including the Baroque, Rococo and Neo-classical; from artists such as Rubens, Watteau, Boucher, Ingres, Delacroix, and Corot. Rather, it contends that 'Japonisme' has hardly had a chance to be whispered next to Renoir's name. The role of Japanese art in the development of his distinctive color, luminosity, texture, and decorative harmony has scarcely been addressed. Compositional devices such as asymmetry, flattened pictorial space, and bold cropping, as well as thematic material including landscape forms, figural poses, and art objects from Japan have been downplayed as props or dismissed as coincidental. By examining specific visual correspondences, alongside textual and biographical material—a broad convergence of evidence emerges into view—achieving, hopefully, a more balanced, multifaceted understanding of Renoir, and shedding light on the creative process by which artworks come into being.

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## Appendix

Left: Utagawa Kunisada, actor print, 'Onoe Kikugoro as Ronin Matagoro' (1823, The Japonisme Museum, Kyoto). Note the fan design, a predecessor of the kind Madame Monet holds in Renoir's painting. Usually the upper swath is pink to light red, the middle white, and the lower swath blue, green, or yellow.

Right: Auguste Renoir, 'Madam Monet and her Son Jean in the Garden at Argenteuil' (1874, National Gallery of Art, DC). This painting was discussed mostly in relation to Utamaro's compositional methods, but as can be seen here, specific motifs could also have been borrowed. If so, even the lone rooster might be a quiet reference to Japanese rooster 'portraits' found across sources from Hokusai's manga to paintings by Ito Jakuchu—portraiture bestowing no less dignity to their subjects than that to fellow human beings, in vivid contrast to the Western portrayals of barn-house fowl. Manet's version of this scene, painted at the same time, depicts them as such. Renoir's creature seems out of place; it stands almost floating, immobile, as if lifted from the gold ground of a byobu or from a kakemono. Once again, Renoir's painting seems more japonisant than his fellow Impressionists; in this case Manet—that good friend of Renoir and Monet—indisputably one of the key figures included in any survey of Japonisme.

Lower right: Katsushika Hokusai, Detail from *Manga*, Vol. 1 (1814, reprint 1868, Brigham Young University, Provo). The image that seems to have captivated impressionist painters such as Manet and Cassatt, may have played a role in Renoir's imagery of the boy Jean, slouching back into the fabric of his mother's dress.



Kunisada, 1823



Renoir, 1874



Hokusai, 1814, reprint 1868

## Afterword

Originally, a list of all the works by Renoir mentioned in this paper was to be provided, with additional works numbering in the dozens as candidates for further research and discussion. Much has been left unsaid for others to pursue.

The author has quoted various scholars, often the more accomplished in studies of late 19th century French art, as to Japanese-influenced aspects of particular Renoir works. That does not contradict the argument that for the most part a silence has prevailed regarding Renoir's japonisme. Those scholars cited represent what is a brave minority opinion (regarding a limited number of works); the vast majority of publications on Renoir, hundreds of which have gone unmentioned in this paper, have not a word about his japonisme. Indeed, if one searches on Google Scholar and the like with the terms "Renoir" and "Japan" what comes up are articles on the influence that Renoir has had on Japanese artists, and none the other way around (in May of 2026).

Nor is this a fault of Western scholarship alone. While there is a 'Society for the Study of Japonisme' based in Tokyo (whose invaluable research goes mostly unrecognized), Japanese scholarship at the better-known and more prestigious public and private universities, notably since the late 1990s, has come to increasingly 'toe the line' with the prevailing global outlook, despite being uniquely positioned to propose specific links to Japanese sources. Almost as if a counterargument to japonisme, there has grown what might be called a near-reflexive insistence on the influence of the West upon Japanese artists among art historians—this despite being thoroughly so understood, from the moment an artist in Japan sits in front of an easel and dabs a brush in oil paint. For of course 'Westernization' is a major theme of Meiji and Taisho-era Japan, permeating all walks of life, and standard fare of junior high school textbooks. There are exceptions, such as Miura Atsushi (emeritus) at Tokyo University, Takashina Erika and Yoshikawa Kazuyoshi (emeritus) at Kyoto University, Hashimoto Yorimitsu at Osaka University, Nishino Ayako at Keio University, and Sakagami Keiko and Yagishita Emi at Waseda University. There are more, but often, as with the aforementioned, they are not in art history but in literature, law, media, or interdisciplinary studies, and it is a circumscribed aspect of their overall research. For each of them there are dozens of others in the field, and in history generally, assiduously engaged in the opposite line of inquiry. And it is mostly the latter that reaches the bookstore and the classroom. If the primary purpose of scholarship is to shed light on the non-obvious, to provide something of scarcity value, one might question whether it has lived up to its responsibilities.

Whether East or West, the marginalization of japonisme works by 'admission without active incorporation'. In other words, if queried, it is claimed to be widely known, yet never woven into the mainstream narrative of art by those who say so, despite being critical for an accurate understanding of historical reality. For many, it seems confined to a separate mental drawer of its own; and few have a grasp of the documented extent of it. In fact, while only an inkling of it can be seen here, japonisme was no mere stylistic episode, but a broad cultural phenomenon spanning half a century—not to mention the japonaiserie of the 17th and 18th centuries and the 'neo-japonisme' of the 20th and 21st centuries—and it may be argued merits closer historical attention analogous to that once given to the Renaissance's rediscovery of classical antiquity.

On both sides of the Pacific there appears to be a misguided idea among some that Japanese influence takes away from Renoir's artistic merit—it does not; rather it provides a picture of greater complexity, of a more cosmopolitan artist than naysayers give him credit for. They do him a disservice. As to his sources, the European current might be wider, and the Japanese narrower—but swifter—a make or break contributor to the success of many of his more original pieces, and which helps to account for that sense of richness one receives from those works. To put it in the terminology of logic, the current of the West, formed primarily by French and Italian art, while obviously necessary, is not by itself always a sufficient explanation for his most original compositions; and that of the East, formed of both craft and graphic arts, is not a sufficient but nonetheless a necessary cause for the unique character of certain paintings of his that have elevated them to the level of iconic masterpieces.

## A Note on Format and Style

The author believes present conventions of art historiography, especially that of italicizing artwork titles in English, need to be re-examined, and should allow for more flexibility regarding the incorporation of non-Western language titles into scholarly works. It is one thing to italicize English but another to tilt complex Chinese characters or Japanese kana. Artwork titles in such languages are often much longer, and at times become near illegible when italicized, and in any case are not an attractive sight. The perceptual effect may be compared to tilting English words in the opposite direction, right to left; the dissonance much more the case with non-alphabetic languages whether one ‘squashes’ them (for that is what inevitably happens) in either direction. What italicizing in non-alphabetic languages is actually asking the reader to do is slightly tilt his head while he reads, hardly a pleasant experience.

The acceptance of italics in English comes from a calligraphic tradition where such forms are equally recognizable; but when looked at from even a short cultural distance, could be considered a parochial practice. It assumes all papers on European art, or for that matter any art, if written in English or a related Indo-European language, need only satisfy those language habits, without thought for someone who might wish to add non-alphabetic language titles in a paper—whether for homonymic clarification, to demonstrate morpho-ideographic significance, or for any other reason. Even in alphabetic languages, italicizing is inconsiderate to the reader when it reaches a certain frequency, disruptive and visually dissonant with non-italicized text. On the other hand, single quotation marks can be passed over without interrupting visual continuity as much, and have been used in this paper for all artwork titles, except for titled artwork series—because they too are a kind of book—an album of pictures. Italics should be given priority for assemblages or sets of things, and for added emphasis.

The double space between sentences was once an honored tradition on both sides of the Atlantic. I pick up a book on a nearby shelf: *The Hobbit*—Thirtieth Printing (1966) and there is nothing wrong with its format, printed that way 30 times in a row across 30 years—with easy-on-the-eyes double spacing between sentences (whose cover design by Tolkien, by the way, is not completely unrelated to our discussion: see Michael Organ, ‘Tolkien’s Japonisme: Prints, Dragons, and a Great Wave’ in *Tolkien Studies*, Vol. 10, 2013, pp. 105-122, West Virginia Univ. Press). On the same bookshelf slightly lower sits David Hume’s *History of England*, six green volumes, published in the 19th century by Harper Brothers, printed with three spaces between sentences, following the custom of early editions. Wider spacing is commonly explained as a typewriter-era habit, but in fact the tradition of wider sentence spacing goes back at least to the 18th century. Double spacing is not excessive; it is a reasonable compromise between the triple spacing of yore and the single spacing of today—the golden mean. All this is not unrelated to our main discussion regarding japonisme; it is a lesson in how a seemingly plausible myth, whether of publishing convention or historical interpretation, persists because it is congruent with the status quo.

The choice of spacing should be the author’s, not some three-letter ‘acronymed’ organization, arbitrating as if heaven sent, in an age that has become decidedly more dogmatic and less poetic in such matters. The sentence is the heart of the English language. Double spacing leaves no question of that, making it quicker to identify and isolate, and removes any doubt should there be typographical lapses between them. A little extra space hurts no one, unless it be a truly penurious publisher. English was once a language where spelling varied (and still does), and one could capitalize, italicize, and hyphenate at will—look at Carlyle. One senses a misguided attempt to cleanse and control, to overcompensate for the unruly past of the English tongue. Art is not science and should not try to be. Reason is essential but lost to those who value format so highly; let them look to texts in tune with the sound-alike academic writing of the age.

References have often been spelled out in full at first mention, and what might have been footnotes incorporated into the main body of the text, because, unlike in the analog past, there are no absolute guarantees against electronic mishaps and security breaches which might sever the connection between text and footnote, affect content, or cause loss of bibliographic entries—which for that reason have also been numbered and contained in one page.

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